

THE WHETSTONE FIST

EPISODE 1



BRIAN K DECLAN



The Whetstone Fist: Episode 1 by Brian K. Declan

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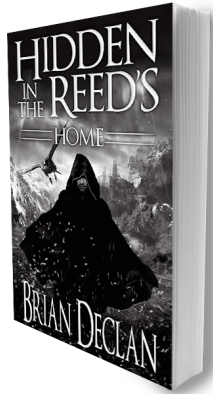
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FREE NOVEL



Thanks for checking out my latest series The Whetstone Fist. If you enjoy please check out some more of my work starting with my free debut novel: Hidden in the Reed's. Or see what else I'm up to on my website: www.briankdeclan.com. You can also find the rest of the Whetstone Fist series: [here](#).

*Enjoy the Story,
-Brian Declan-*

CHAPTER 1



The long walk to Lord Stanwick's Estate always felt like marching to the gallows. It's strange, Stanwick must think those gleaming white walls make the place look safe and inviting. To Lock it looked more like a big fancy prison. His men in their gleaming armor were more like prison guards than defenders. Besides, there was nothing to defend against this far from the city limits. City guardsmen, like his dad, did all the real fighting.

"Why the sour face?" asked Flint.

Lock forced a smile, "Nothing, just lost in thought."

"Well snap out of it, we're almost there."

"Yeah, I see the walls," replied Lock.

"Hold up," said Flint as he caught Lock's shoulder, and forced him to face him.

"What?" asked Lock.

With a sudden burst of speed his dad jabbed him in the chest with his finger.

It didn't really hurt but still Lock took a step back, "What?"

"I know you don't like this place, but it's time to buck up. An Initiation is no joke. Screw it up and you'll end up busting your

ass in the guard for the rest of your life. Neither of us wants that, so focus.”

Yeah like you haven't told me that every damn day for the past fifteen years.

For his dad's sake Lock took a deep breath and let it out slowly, “I'm focused.”

That was one of the nice things about his dad, it didn't take much to keep him happy. With a quick smack on the shoulder, Flint turned back to the estate and continued walking, “Good then let's go.”

Thankfully, his dad was content to walk the last hundred yards to the gates to Stanwick's Estate in silence. The last thing he needed was another pointless reminder about the *importance* of today's events. Lock stayed a half step behind his dad as they passed through the gates. He was expecting the estate guards to make an incident, but they simply gave his father a firm nod and waved them into the courtyard.

Across the courtyard was a ridiculous staircase that had no purpose other than to *wow* visitors. There was no way that thing was designed with any real function in mind. It was all just for show. Mid way up the staircase a pair of the Stanwick's retainers stopped lounging against the manse's walls and moved over to block the top of the stairs.

“Useless fucking guards,” mumbled one of the retainers, then he raised his voice, “Lord Stanwick has enough guardsmen. Come back next month.”

Lock's father hopped up a step to put himself in front of Lock and turned his body sideways, “My son is here for an Initiation.”

His hand shifted slightly to the hilt of his sword but stopped when the two retainers burst out laughing, “Funny. Now piss off.”

Prick, should watch his mouth before he ends up eating dirt.

“No joke I'm afraid. Magister Tempo can vouch for us. Flint Sharp, and my son Matlock,” replied Flint.

The retainers stopped laughing and shared a look. Whether

that was because they recognized his father's name or because they were afraid of Magister Tempo, Lock was not sure. Regardless they moved aside.

"Whatever," said the other retainer, "Let them deal with it inside."

Without another word they climbed the rest of the stairs and walked up to Stanwick's manse. The doublewide doors opened on their own when they were a few paces away.

Okay, he had to give Lord Stanwick credit for that, it was cool. The rest of Stanwick's overindulgent estate was silly, but the doors were pretty neat.

The last time Lock entered Stanwick's manse was almost five years ago. The inside of the manse looked the same as he remembered. From the pristine marble staircases that flanked the entryway to the scent of fresh cut flowers and baked bread, it was exactly the same. Even the impeccably clean floor looked like it had not collected the slightest hint of dust.

Lock hated it. The world wasn't meant to be that clean. Not the world he grew up in.

"Come on," said Lock's dad as he walked between the staircases and down a straight hallway. The hallway was flanked by doors, but his dad led them to one of the rooms in the far back. He stopped in front of a pair of double doors and knocked twice. At the slightest touch both doors creaked open.

Inside there were three men at least ten years older than his dad. They were lounging around a stout coffee table. Each was sipping at what smelled like freshly brewed coffee. Strong coffee.

One of them jumped to his feet with a wide smile as they entered, "Flint, you came. I was not sure if I'd be seeing you," said the man as he rushed over to shake Flint's hand then he turned to Lock, "And the young Matlock, you've grown so much."

"He has," replied Flint as he motioned Lock into the room.

"Excellent, excellent. I'm Magister Tempo," said the man as he offered his hand.

“Hello,” said Lock accepting Tempo’s hand.

The old man eagerly started pumping his hand with a surprising amount of strength, “Come, come sit. Would you like some coffee while we wait for the other candidates?”

“Sadly, I can’t,” said Flint with a frown, “I’ve got patrol at noon.”

Tempo stopped pumping Lock’s arm and looked at Flint like he just said he had a date with a demon horde. The two other men were equally surprised. One of them froze. The other choked on a sip of his coffee.

“No thanks, coffee makes me jittery,” said Lock to break the awkward silence.

Tempo snapped out of his daze and let go of Lock’s hand, “Ah can’t have that today. You may have a seat. I need to have a word with your father. I’ll walk you out. Magister Cadence and Magister Vercon can answer any questions until I return.”

Without another word Tempo and Flint left the room. Lock took a seat across from Tempo’s two companions and tried to think of something to say. He’d never cared much for small talk, but it seemed rude to say nothing.

“So how do you know Magister Tempo?” asked Lock.

The man on his right stopped choking on his coffee cleared his throat, “Magister Vercon and I are teachers at Waystar.”

“Oh, right,” replied Lock.

“Not that Head-Magister Tempo does much teaching these days,” replied Vercon.

“Ah,” said Lock drawing out the sound in an attempt to buy time to think of another question. Thankfully, the doors opened again and in walked a pair of youngmen.

Magister Cadence finished his coffee with a single gulp and stood up to greet the two candidates. They both were around Lock’s age, but he had never seen them before. Not surprising considering their fine silk cloths and the galvanized metal spell-

rods hanging from their waist. You didn't see much of that in the slums of East Stanwick.

Lock moved to the far side of the couch he was sitting on as Magister Cadence finished his greeting and instructed the two candidates to have a seat. They were both fairly thin but with Lock's broad shoulders the couch felt like it had one person too many. To make matters worse, a few seconds later another candidate entered the room followed by Magister Tempo. This time it was a young girl.

She had a stern look on her face and her golden blonde hair was tied behind her head in tight ponytail. She was cute, despite the no nonsense vibe. Probably because she was tiny. Little things always looked cuter.

As Lock checked her gear, he felt a twinge of self-consciousness about his own kit. He was the only one wearing leather armor instead of fine braided silk and his only weapon was a short sword whereas the other three had spellrods.

"Great! With Miss Everbright we are only waiting on one more," said Tempo with his usual excitement.

"Sorry Magister, Shela moved to a later time. She said something about her brother having a later start time and wanted to go with him," replied the young girl, Miss Everbright.

"Ah, understandable but a shame none the less," said Tempo then he clapped his hands together, "Shall we?"

Tempo waited for them to nod then he walked to the back of the room and stopped in front of a wall with a large mural of the continent.

It took a moment for Lock to realize he was supposed to get up, so the two other candidates walked around the opposite end of the couch. Good thing he was taller than them and could still see what Tempo was doing as they followed him to the back of the room.

The mural seemed to be a sort of map but on top of the landscape there were thin streaks of purple, blue, green and a slew of

other colors. Toward the center of the map a few of the blue streaks intersected with each other. Tempo raised his palm with his fingers curled forward and plunged it into one of those intersections. A few inches before his hand hit the wall a glowing circle of interlaced sigils appeared around his fingers.

Tempo twisted his hand clockwise then counterclockwise and the entire wall burst into a cloud of blinding blue smoke. As Lock blinked the stars from his vision, he realized the wall was completely gone. It had become a portal to what looked like an underground cavern. Judging by the moldy smell and lack of light, it must have been deep underground. Maybe the bowels of a nearby mountain.

Tempo and his two companions stepped in front of the portal and turned to face the candidates, "A few things before we let you go. Your goal," he said turning his left palm up.

Magister Cadence took his cue from Tempo, "There is a well at the bottom of the caverns. Your goal is to reach it and drink. If you succeed, you'll be returned to us here in Lord Stanwick's study."

Magister Vercon picked up as soon as Magister Cadence stopped speaking, "The caverns form a network of twisting tunnels much like a maze, but remember your goal is at the bottom most chamber. Keep moving down and you will find it eventually. However, the twisting maze of tunnels is not your only concern. Keep your eyes and ears alert at all times."

"If you run into too much trouble," said Tempo as he pulled six small blue crystals from his pants pocket, "these are despawn crystals. They will despawn all monsters in the area and effectively end the Initiation. In other words, you will fail. Only use them if you must."

Tempo motioned for Miss Everbright's wrist, "In addition to the crystal, we'll be giving you each an auraband. It's nothing much, it will help you to see in the caverns and monitor your health, stamina and mana levels. You will also be able to track

experience gains, but you must return them at the end of your initiation.”

In one smooth motion Tempo slapped Miss Everbright’s wrist with a thick strip of copper colored metal. The moment the metal touched her skin, Tempo let go and the strip of metal wrapped around her wrist. The back of her hand began to glow, and a series of numbers appeared on the auraband.

LVL. 1 Human Female: Clarisse Everbright

Exp. 0/1000

72/72 Health.

95/95 Mana.

40/40 Stamina.

“A RESPECTABLE AMOUNT OF MANA. Quite impressive, but you’ll need to work on your stamina,” said Tempo as he flicked his fingers for the other candidates to give him their hands.

Tempo slapped another strip of metal on the next candidate’s wrist.

LVL. 1 Human Male: Jasper Stanford

Exp. 0/1000

85/85 Health.

82/82 Mana.

53/53 Stamina.

“ALL GOOD, NUMBERS,” nodded Tempo reaching for the next candidate.

. . .

LVL. 1 Human Male: Drew Stanford

Exp. 0/1000

80/80 Health.

83/83 Mana.

48/48 Stamina.

AFTER READING DREW'S STATS, Lock nudged his way to the front and offered Tempo his hand. As soon as he slapped the auraband on Lock's wrist and the whole room exploded into bright colors. The sudden onslaught of light caused him to stumble back, "Whoa."

It took a several seconds for his vision to adjust to the currents of magic he was seeing, he glanced down at his stats.

LVL. 1 Human Male: Matlock Sharp

Exp. 0/1000

113/113 Health.

41/41 Mana.

98/98 Stamina.

HE LOOKED up to see Tempo staring at his wrist, "Abysmal mana, you'll need to take extra care to improve."

Yeah, thanks for pointing out the obvious.

"How long does the auraband last?" asked Lock.

"Excellent question. At your mana levels it would only last about an hour but the natural Ether flow in the caverns will maintain it for about twelve hours. The monsters also respawn every twelve hours. That's part of the reason we use this area for Initiations," replied Tempo, "Any other questions?"

"Yeah, how are we supposed to retain our experience?" asked Jasper.

“Don’t worry, the Blessing you earn from completing all five floors will take care of that. If you fail; however, you’ll need to find other means to earn a Blessing,” replied Magister Vercon.

Tempo stepped to the side, “If there are no more questions, make your way through the portal. Mr. Sharp if you will.”

Great he was standing in the back but supposed to go first. Why did teachers always do stuff like that, couldn’t they see how big he was compared to the rest of them. Whatever. Lock pushed his way between the two Stanford brothers, stepped through the portal...

And immediately face planted into a pile of moldy cave dirt.

Damnit, his dad was right; he wasn’t focused.

While he picked himself up and spit out the dirt the other candidates passed through the portal and disappeared farther into the caves. The portal snapped shut with a slight sucking sound. Lock brushed off what dirt he could and rushed to catch up.

All three of them had stopped just around the bend in an area where the tunnel opened up into a large chamber at least thirty feet in height and fifty feet wide. Branching out from the chamber there were seven tunnels, all of which seemed to be sloped downward. While the others went to explore the chamber, he drew his sword and dug a quick arrow pointing back up the tunnel they just emerged from.

One of his biggest concerns was getting lost in the caves and running around in circles. Thankfully, a little forethought might be able to save a lot of time down the road.

“I say we each take a cavern. If you run into a dead end or find another place where it branches, head back. We’ll meet here in say an hour if we don’t find anything,” suggested Clare.

Lock nodded to Clare, “Sounds good to me,” but Drew and Jasper just ignored her. They shared a whispered word then went down the tunnel on the far right.

“Assholes,” said Clare as the two brothers disappeared. From

the look on Clare's face, she probably knew them, "Just the two of us then. My name's Clare."

"Aa, yeah I read your stats. Matlock but you can call me Lock," Lock replied then offered his hand.

Clare glanced at his dirty hand then looked him in the eye, "No offense but are you sure you're ready for this?"

"Don't worry about me," said Lock.

Clare pursed her lips then shrugged, "If you say so. Our best bet of making it to the bottom is if we work together. We've got limited time to find a way to the bottom, and there are way too many tunnels to explore before time runs out. According to my brother we need to go down five levels, each with a large chamber like this one. The problem is most of the tunnels dead end or just spiral back on themselves."

After a few moments it became clear she was not going to shake his hand, so he brushed it off on his pants, "Alright then what are we waiting for; I'll take the far left. You take the one next to it. I suggest marking your path to keep track of the tunnels that loop back on each other."

"Not a bad idea," said Clare as she walked over to the second tunnel from the left but paused before entering, "Um, be careful. These tunnels could be full of monsters."

Yeah, that's the one thing I am ready for.

CHAPTER 2



Clare was right; the tunnels were literally crawling with monsters. Spiders as big as housecats, bats bigger than eagles and slimes. The fucking slimes were a pain, because his sword did nothing against them. They were slow and easy to avoid. His tunnel forked twice but within half an hour of scouting, he was able to slaughter most of the monsters and find a path down to the next large chamber. He marked the appropriate path in the dirt and went back up to wait for Clare.

While waiting he sat down to clean the spider guts off his sword. A couple minutes later Clare came running out of the fourth tunnel.

She slid to a stop panting, “You’re finally back.”

“What do you mean finally?” said Lock, “I was waiting for you.”

Clare ignored his question and bent over to steady her breathing, “Any luck?”

“Yeah, I marked a path to the next chamber. Was just waiting for you to get back,” said Lock.

“Oh good, I explored the rest of the tunnels. They’re all

blocked by monsters,” said Clare as she huffed out a breath and stood up straight, “What are you waiting for?”

“I was just,” began Lock but Clare had already disappeared down the far-left tunnel, “Waiting on you, ya stuck up jerk.”

After a cooling breath, he wiped the last bit of guts off his sword and followed Clare down the marked path. Not even thirty feet in he found Clare prancing around a pair of spiders and hung back to let her have the experience from killing them.

“What are you doing? Help me out here,” blurted Clare as she back peddled away from one of the spiders.

Without another word Lock jumped in and thrust his sword right between the cluster of eyes on the spider’s bulbous head. A few seconds later Clare dispatched her spider with a burst of mana from her spellrod then spun on him, “What the hell? I thought we were going to work together.”

“Uh yeah, I found the path and came back to get you. What’s the problem?” replied Lock as he kept close watch of Clare’s spellrod.

“You stood there and watched me almost get gorged by that spider is the problem,” said Clare as she jabbed her rod at Lock.

On instinct Lock shifted into a low guard, “Take it easy.”

The runes on Clare’s rod flashed as she readied an attack, “What’s the deal? Are you going to watch my back, or do I need to worry about you screwing me over?”

“I just figured you would want the experience. It’s not much but it adds up,” replied Lock.

A few tense moments passed as they stood there staring at each other but eventually Clare lowered her spellrod, “How many of these things did you kill already?”

“I don’t know, maybe sixty,” replied Lock.

“No way, let me see your auraband,” exclaimed Clare. Lock raised his hand so she could check his stats.

. . .

Lvl. 1 Human: Matlock Sharp

Exp. 623/1000

113/113 Health.

41/41 Mana.

92/98 Stamina.

“I TAKE IT BACK, you’re more prepared than I thought,” said Clare as she dropped Lock’s hand.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m sure my face plant back there didn’t make the best impression,” said Lock.

Clare shrugged and continued down the tunnel, “And your mana level is like a child’s.”

“You’re one to talk, your stamina is no better,” said Lock loud enough to draw the attention of a trio of bats.

“Keep your voice down,” blurted Clare as she fired off a mana blast at one of the bats. The attack connected but the bat shook it off with ease.

In an effort to avoid another staring contest with Clare, Lock rushed forward and sliced through one of the bats then slammed another to the ground with his off hand. While it squirmed on the ground, he finished it off with a quick stomp. By then Clare killed the third bat with a flurry of mana blasts.

“You good,” asked Lock as Clare fired another blast at the dead bat.

Clare took a breath then nodded, “Yeah sorry I snapped at you, I’m not used to fighting monsters.”

“Not for calling me a child,” said Lock in an attempt at humor.

“I didn’t... Ah whatever. Let’s keep moving,” said Clare as she took a few steps down the tunnel then stopped, “Actually, you should go first.”

Lock took the lead without complaint and they made their way down to the second chamber in relative silence. Each time they encountered more monsters, they fell into a nice pattern.

Lock hit them head on while Clare stayed back and fired her spellrod from a distance. The strategy worked without flaw and before he knew it they made it back to the second chamber.

Lock was about to enter the chamber when Clare caught his wrist, "Hold on, there should be a monster guarding each of the chambers."

"Looks clear to me," said Lock.

"The Stanford's could have cleared it already, but just in case wait a second for my mana to regenerate," said Clare.

"Alright, if there is trouble, I say we stick to what we've been doing. You cover me from behind," said Lock.

"I was thinking the same and if there's trouble we fall back to this tunnel," suggested Clare.

Lock nodded his agreement, "Ready?"

Clare took a deep breath and bobbed her head. Together they stalked into the chamber trying to make as little noise as possible. They were no more than two steps into the chamber when a ten-foot slime dropped from the center of the ceiling.

Clare didn't hesitate to blast it with her rod, but Lock froze. His sword was useless against the damn slimes. If he attacked all it would do is get stuck.

The slime giggled and bounced closer. Clare fired off another blast, "What are you doing? Attack it."

"My sword's useless against that thing," complained Lock.

"Yeah, it's a magical creature. Channel mana into it you dope," said Clare as she fired another mana blast.

Lock took a second to focus his mana, but nothing happened. The slime giggled bounced toward them a second time. There was no time; they needed another plan, so Lock rushed forward, "Keep blasting it, I'll get it to chase me."

"You what?! Wait just... Ah fuck it," said Clare as she powered up another blast and took aim.

Despite the Slime being massive, it was painfully slow and stupid. All Lock had to do was throw a few stones at it and it

would giggle bounced after him again. Clare continued to pepper it with mana bolt after mana bolt. The first one got its attention, but it was too dumb to know what shot at it and continued to chase Lock.

The plan was spontaneous and simple, but it worked. Lock threw rocks and led it in circles while Clare wore it down with mana blasts.

Occasionally one of Clare's attacks would catch it's attention but all Lock had to do was throw a few rocks and they were back in business. It went that way for the next ten minutes or so. Lock kept it bouncing in circles while Clare chipped away at its health. Twice she had to retreat to the tunnel and regenerate her mana but in the end, they cleared the second chamber without a scratch.

The moment the Slime died Lock felt a surge of power run through his body followed by what seemed to be a swirling ring of yellow light. When the surge of power faded, he noticed Clare bent over rubbing her forehead.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She sat down and huffed out a breath, "Yeah, it's only a headache. Looks like you leveled up."

Lock glanced down at his hand.

LVL. 2 Human: Matlock Sharp

Exp. 305/1250

124/124 Health.

45/45 Mana.

108/108 Stamina.

"YEAH I DID. That thing must have given like 500 XP. My mana still sucks though," said Lock.

Clare continued to rub her head, "That's because you never

use it. If we're going to make it any farther, we need to change that."

"I've dealt with monsters easily enough thus far," said Lock.

"Then what happen with the slime, huh? You would have been screwed if I wasn't here, and frankly I don't want to burn through my mana like that again," said Clare.

Lock cracked his neck, "I'd say it was a joint effort but fine. How am I supposed to channel mana into the sword?"

Clare's eyes widened then she blinked a few times and her headache seemed to go away, "Here try it with my spellrod first," she said as she tossed him her spellrod.

Lock caught the spellrod then pointed it across the chamber, "Alright what now?"

Clare snorted out a breath, "For starters flip it around before you blast yourself in the chest," then she stood up to adjust Lock's grip. When she was done, she took a step back, "Okay good. Now do you feel that swirling in your chest?"

Lock bobbed his head as he took aim again, "Yeah I know that much."

"That's the source of your mana. Once you get that, try to feel how it flows around your body. It should go from your heart, to your head and down your arm. Through your legs, hands and fingers," explained Clare.

"Okay I've got it. What next?" asked Lock.

Clare took a step behind Lock, "Now you need to control that flow. Extend it into the spellrod and—

In an instant the spellrod fired a tiny mana blast across the room, "Holy crap, it worked."

"Congrats, now for the hard part. Before you extend the mana flow into the rod, try to build it up in your fist. The more mana you build up the stronger the blast will be," said Clare.

"Ah, that's why my blast was so crappy," said Lock as he took aim again.

He turned his focus back to his mana, then the spellrod slowly

began to glow. Without warning a blinding mana blast flew across the room and shattering a large chunk of stone off the far wall. The sound echoed around the chamber and sent a searing pain through Lock's head. The pain was so bad that he stumbled back and lost his grip on the spellrod.

"Whoa, you don't put everything into one shot you idiot," said Clare as she rushed to catch Lock.

Lock squinted open his eyes, "A little warning would have been nice."

"Screw you. It's not my fault you don't know anything. I was trying to help," said Clare as her concern turned to anger. She shoved Lock, collected her spellrod, and walked off to explore the next set of tunnels.

"Nice, piss off you're only ally," said Lock to himself, "Great plan."

CHAPTER 3



Lock rubbed his face hoping to clear the lingering mana headache and tried to think of his next move. Clare ran down the second tunnel from the left. He could follow her and try to apologize. Then again finding a safe path to the third chamber would be a nice way to make it up to her.

Words are meaningless in the face of inaction.

With that thought Lock drew his sword and went down the far left tunnel. Ten feet in a spider the size of a large dog dropped out of nowhere. As the spider fell its front two legs slashed a pair of thin cuts down his leather chest plate. Lock bounced back but the moment the spider hit the ground it bunched its legs and sprang at him.

He threw out his free hand in an attempt to knock it back. He missed and the spider's fangs sink into his forearm. At the same time its razor sharp front legs clawed at him. A sudden jolt of pain shot up his arm the spider's fangs punched through his armor. Once the spider found the soft meat of his forearm, it went into a frenzy and clawed at him with a whirlwind of slashing limbs.

The spider's frantic assault caught him off guard and he fell

on his back. Thankfully pain had a way of forcing him to focus. Lock dropped his sword, bunched his fist and smashed it into the spider's side. The first punch rocked the spider back, but it's flailing limbs absorbed the blow. The second, and third punch knocked it on its back, but it still clung to his arm.

Feeling its prey get away, the spider clamped down even harder on his forearm. The pain sent Lock into an even deeper rage. Now that he was on top, he realized he had the advantage not only in position but also in weight. Huge spider or not, it still only weighed seventy some pounds. Lock grabbed onto the base of one of its front legs, lifted it slightly off the ground then bashed its head into the ground.

The effect was immediate; it released his left hand. But instead of letting go of the spider Lock grabbed its other front leg and continued bashing the spiders face into the ground until it went limp. Or at least until its legs stopped flailing.

Whether he bashed it ten times or twenty he wasn't sure. He was too filled with rage to count how many times he pummeled its lifeless body. Regardless it was dead.

He stood up panting, "That'll teach you to sneak attack someone twice your size."

Lock huffed out a breath to clear his lungs and bent down to collect his sword. As his fingers tightened around the sword's handle, a throb of pain jolted his whole body. He dropped the blade.

A second throb of pain pulsed through his body and he immediately knew what happen. His hand darted to the small herb pouch he kept strapped to his belt. Nothing. There was no pouch. It must have come loose during his scuffle with the spider. Lock spun around in a panic and scanned the ground for his lost pouch. Nothing.

Maybe he lost it in the fight with the Slime. He was about to rush back to the second chamber when his body throbbled with pain again. His body seized up for a second then he missed a step

and crash to the ground. He pushed the pain to the back of his mind and with sheer will picked himself up. He put one foot in front of the other. Each step was agony. It felt like he was wearing lead boots. His arms began to seize up, but it was not the pain or the difficulty that made him stop cold. It was the sudden realization that his herb pouch was not in the second chamber either.

He collapsed to the ground. His only hope of fighting the poison was lost. He clawed at the dirt one last time before his body froze. But while the poison trapped his body, his mind was clear. Too bad that was a torture in itself. His own body had become a cage.

Careless! Unfocused!

He could practically hear his father's words. If he saw how easily that spider snuck up on him, he would have been right. Lock should never have let that happen. He had been too busy thinking of his blunder with Clare, not focused. Not living in the present.

One mistake is all it takes to end your life.

Guardsman died all the time from stupid mistakes just like this. Even seasoned veterans lost track of time or got overconfident and died to low level monsters. The monsters of the wild were unforgiving like that. The same applied to this moldy old cave. He might not be dead yet, but he was easy prey. Another monster could wander by any second and finish him. Or.

"Why are you laying in the dirt?" asked Clare.

Yes!

"Come on, stop screwing around. The monsters are getting stronger. We should explore together from now on," said Clare.

Yeah, no shit.

"You're hurt," blurted Clare as she ran over to Lock, "What is it? What happen?"

I screwed up.

“Your arm’s bleeding!” squealed Clare, “Oh god, it’s yellow. Your bleeding yellow! So gross.”

Poison, now hurry up and find my herbs.

“I can do this,” said Clare as she took a deep breath, “Yellow probably means poison. What did my brother give me for poison?”

Goldleaf, crushed goldleaf.

“It’s gotta be here somewhere,” said Clare as she riffled through her pack. A few moments later she pulled out a tiny yellow vial and pressed it to Lock’s lips. She dumped the dull yellow liquid and instantly he felt the stiffness in his muscles begin to relax.

By the time the vial was empty the paralysis in his body had completely worn off. He sat up and before he realized what he was doing; he pulled Clare into a hug. A moment later his mind caught up to his body and he pulled back in an awkward jerk.

“Sorry,” blurted Lock, “I mean, thanks.”

Clare acted like he hadn’t done anything. All business, “What happen?”

“Spider bit me but I lost my herbs. I came up here trying to find them, and collapsed. It must have some poison.”

Clare blinked then put her hands up, “Hold on, a spider bit you then just let you crawl away.”

“Not exactly. I killed it then stumbled up here,” said Lock.

For a few moments Clare stared blankly at him, “How... It doesn’t matter. You need to be more careful. Where’s your sword?”

“I must have dropped it. Left tunnel, but first I need to find my herbs,” said Lock.

Clare stood up and offered her hand to help Lock up, “They’re just herbs, forget about it.”

“They’re not just herbs. We might need them,” replied Lock.

Clare folded her arms in front of her chest, “We don’t have

time. The monsters are getting stronger causing us to move slower.”

She had a point, they had to get moving and the monsters would get stronger the lower they went. But the herbs were the only way he had to heal and counteract the spider’s poison. It was only a matter of time before another spider poisoned one of them, so they needed the herbs.

“There’s no point in rushing if we get killed by poison in the process,” said Lock.

Clare pulled another yellow potion out of her pack and drank it, “Satisfied?”

This time it was time for Lock to give a blank stare, “What?”

Clare huffed out a breath, “The potion has a thirty-six hour effect. Neither of us need to worry about poison.”

Thirty-six hours! Holy crow. Those potions were worth a fortune. Any potion that lasted more than a few minutes, cost more than. Well, it cost more than he could imagine, and she gave him one without a second thought.

“How many of those do you have?” asked Lock, his voice lower than he intended.

Clare zipped her bag shut, tossed it over her shoulder, and gave the strap a sharp tug, “Enough.”

Lock put his hands up, “I was just surprised you brought such a powerful potion, let alone two of them.”

“Well, I’m surprised they let you come here,” replied Clare.

Still a jerk.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” demanded Lock.

Clare snatched her spellrod off her belt and started walking away, “Nothing, we need to move.”

“Not nothing. You’ve clearly got more to say so have at it,” said Lock.

Clare stopped abruptly and spun around, “You’re not ready for any of this, and that puts my future in jeopardy.”

“I might not have as nice a gear as you, but I’ve prepared for

this my entire life. In case you forgot, I killed most of the monsters thus far. And, you might not want to admit it but we took out that huge slime together,” said Lock as calm as he could manage. Still by the end he was practically shouting.

Clare seemed startled by Lock’s rise in volume but instead of backing down she rose to the challenge, “No you ran around in circles while I drained my mana killing it. And why was that again? Oh, right because not only do you not have a proper weapon or supplies, but you don’t have a freaking clue how to use your mana. Guess what genius, a Blessing uses mana.”

“If I’m so useless then why bother to save me? Do you like to waste money?” Lock snapped his fingers, “That’s right, where you come from gold just falls from the sky and multiplies.”

Clare snorted out a breath, “You’re one to talk. Your parents had the money to pay for an Initiation. They should have spent some of that money on better gear and training,” then she snapped her fingers to mock him, “They’re just as inept as you.”

Before he knew it, he was in Clare’s face. She raised her spellrod but her reaction was comically slow. He slapped the rod out of her hand and clamped his hand around her neck, “Insult my father again, and I’ll end you. I’ll fucking end you. Understood?”

He waited for her to answer but after a few moments of silence he realized she couldn’t breathe. That simple realization was enough to snap him back to his senses. He let her go.

Clare dropped to the floor coughing, “I...” she muttered then broke out coughing again.

Lock watched her try to speak and debated offering an apology, but the truth was, he did not want to apologize. Not to some stuck-up rich chick. Then again, she saved him from the poison, and he was the one who lost his temper.

“Sorry I snapped. Like it or not I still think we should stick together. I’m going to get my sword. If you’re not here when I get back, I understand. Either way good luck,” said Lock.

Before entering the tunnel, he took a deep breath and let go of the tension between his shoulders. If the past few minutes taught him anything it was that he had to stay focused and in control. No matter what happen next, he was not about to let another monster catch him off guard. Not again.

He continued forward with caution and steadily stalked his way down the tunnel until he found the broken body of the spider he killed. The sword should have been right here, but he found nothing. Just like his herb pouch the sword had disappeared. In frustration he kicked the dead spider's curled up body, "Piece of crap."

Its bunched-up body rolled farther down the tunnel like a tumble weed and stopped about ten feet away. As soon as it stopped rolling, another spider dropped on top of it and sank its fangs into the dead carcass. Since it was distracted, Lock seized the opportunity and rushed forward to kick it. This time he planted his off foot and connected with as much force as possible. Both spiders flew across the tunnel and slammed into the wall with bone-breaking force.

They were both dead, but Lock gave the second spider a good stomp just in case. As he stopped the spider, he caught a glint of light from the other spider. His lost sword was sticking out of his back. That was what attracted the second spider. Good thing he caught it before it got too far away, or it would have disappeared with his only weapon.

The whole exchange was a good reminder, spiders struck anything shiny or moving fast. If he kept the sword sheathed and moved slow, they might not notice him.

Anyway, he had his sword back, and learned his lesson. Time to go see if Clare decided to stick with him or not. When he turned around, to head back up the tunnel she was already there. She stood perfectly still, staring at him with that stern face. Cute stern face.

"What?" he asked.

Clare glanced at the dead spiders, "I was going to say we should stick together..."

"...but," prompted Lock.

"But I don't know if I can trust you," answered Clare.

Lock nodded, they had just met each other, "You can trust that I want to earn a Blessing. Like you."

"That doesn't mean you're not going to stop me from getting mine," said Clare as she watched Lock's eyes.

"What do I care if you get one?" asked Lock.

Clare shrugged, "Don't know, you could have many reasons to sabotage someone else's success."

"Well, I'm not like that," replied Lock, "Are we sticking together or not?"

"First let's get one thing perfectly clear. You ever touch me again, and I'll blast you in the back the first chance I get. You saw what your 50 points of mana did. I've got twice that, and I know how to use it," said Clare.

"Point taken," said Lock, "I'd rather not have to look over my shoulder the entire time we're here."

"Yeah, well you've got your sword back, now lead the way," said Clare as she tossed Lock's herb pouch at him.

CHAPTER 4



As it turned out Level 2 spiders lurked the entire tunnel, the first two Lock killed were only the start. He killed three more but no more than thirty yards down they were forced to stop. A group of five of spiders feasted on some sort of rotting carcass. Based on the size it was probably a large bat or flying insect.

“Turn back?” asked Lock.

“No point the other tunnels are full of just as many monsters. I think we have to fight through them,” answered Clare.

“Alright, cover me,” said Lock.

Before Clare could respond he leapt on the closest spider. His sword slashed down, severing the spider’s bulbous hind segment from the rest of its body. He followed that up with quick thrust through another spider’s beady eyes. Clare fired off a blast from her rod scattering the other three, but Lock rushed in and kicked one of them into the cavern wall.

The last two spiders tried to flee as their brethren died but Clare fried one with a charged blast from her rod. Lock severed the last one’s leg then with a burst of speed he dashed in front of it and slammed his blade through its head.

The moment the last one was dead Clare walked up to Lock and shoved him. Or at least she tried. She was easily seventy-five to a hundred pounds lighter than him and had no chance of actually moving him, "Don't be reckless."

Lock forced himself not to laugh at her failed attempt to push him and took an unnecessary step back, "It's called being decisive."

Clare snorted out a breath, "A little warning next time, alright?"

"Alright, but if I must say we did pretty good," replied Lock.

"You're a brute," said Clare then she flicked her fingertips at Lock, "Keep going."

She was right, so Lock didn't argue. It was not long before they found more spiders, most in packs of two or three but they had little difficulty cutting or blasting through them. Of course, that was when another problem popped up. The tunnel split into three separate passages.

"You have a preference?" asked Lock.

"No but give me a minute to regen my mana," replied Clare.

"Oh right, sure," said Lock as he pulled out a small square of cloth and began to clean his blade.

Clare took a seat along the side of the tunnel, "That sword special or something?"

"Huh?" said Lock, a little surprised Clare was starting a conversation, "Um yeah. It was my pop's. I mean my grandfather's."

"It seems small for you," said Clare, then she quickly put her hands up, "I didn't mean it... Just... sorry I don't know anything about swords."

"No, you're right. My pop was short and used to duel wield a pair of these. It's a bit small for me but it's the best weapon my dad owns aside from his own blade. But that's a two-handed saber, I prefer something with a bit more weight to it," answered Lock.

“Why don’t you channel mana into it when you attack?” asked Clare.

Lock paused trying to read Clare’s face, she seemed genuine, “I’ve been trying, it doesn’t seem to work.”

Clare rubbed her ear lobe for a few seconds, “Can I see it?”

Lock stopped cleaning the blade and flipped it around to hand to her. Clare took the sword with both hands, which should have been awkward since it was a single-handed weapon. Then again, small hands.

“Its heavy,” said Clare as she closed her eyes. A few moments later a gentle blue aura formed around the sword. She stayed like that for a while before she opened her eyes and handed the sword back to Lock, “Its not like the spellrod but it will accept mana. You’ll need to push harder.”

“I don’t understand. How’d you do that?” asked Lock as he took the sword back. The aura died immediately.

“A spellrod is designed to have mana channeled through it. It practically pulls it from your hand. Your sword isn’t made with that in mind, but it’s possible. Just takes more effort,” said Clare.

“Alright,” said Lock as he closed his eyes and focused on channeling his mana into the sword.

He felt like something was about to happen when Clare broke his concentration, “Stop, you’re just pushing all your mana into your hand.”

“Yeah, my hand is touching the sword,” replied Lock like it was obvious.

Clare shook her head, “Don’t use so much of it. You’re trying to push what’s in your hand into the blade. Not moving everything in your body closer to the blade. It doesn’t work like that.”

A few more minutes went by while Lock practiced and failed at channeling his mana into the blade. Finally, he got frustrated and sheathed the sword, “This isn’t working. Let’s just keep moving.”

Clare stood up, “Alright but I’ve got something you can try.”

“Oh?” asked Lock.

“Next time you’re in close with one of those spiders, channel some mana into your fist and punch it. Should work the same as the sword, might even drop it in one hit,” said Clare.

“Cool, I didn’t know you could discharge mana from your hands,” said Lock only to have her stare at him with that no nonsense face, “What?”

“You can’t discharge mana from your hand, or the sword for that matter. You’ll just hit it harder, a lot harder,” said Clare.

“Oh, I was hoping it would be more explosive, like your spellrod,” said Lock.

“No offense but how do you not know any of this? Someone must have taught you?” asked Clare.

Lock raised his chin, “Magister Tempo showed me a few things when I was little.”

“And since then?” pressed Clare.

“My dad trained me,” replied Lock as he continued down the nearest tunnel.

Clare took a couple quick steps and fell in behind him, “Then you must have learned how to use your mana. I mean, I can’t tell if you’re trying to deceive me.”

Lock stopped, “I’m not deceiving you. My dad’s a city guardsmen. He taught me the best he could. He doesn’t know the first thing about firing a spellrod. He didn’t have money for an Initiation, or better gear. Magister Tempo simply owed him a favor, plain and simple.”

The moment Lock stopped Clare snapped up her spellrod and the runes flared to life. For a moment she just stood there pointing her rod down the tunnel, “I... that’s not what I expected you to say. It’s not like Magister Tempo to owe someone.”

“Well, I hope you didn’t really expect me to say I was nobility. What’s your story?” asked Lock.

“No I didn’t, but that’s more likely than being the son of a city guard,” said Clare fired off a charged blast from her rod, a

moment later a spider dropped dead from the roof of the cavern, “My parents are merchants from Wilhelm, they wanted something better for me and my brother so they saved up for years to give us a chance at earning Blessings.”

Lock rushed forward to engage a pair of spiders. With a well-timed thrust, he impaled one then charged his fist to punch the other but before he could attack, Clare blasted it.

He released the charge and kept walking, “What sort of merchants?”

“They’re brewers,” replied Clare, “They supply a couple of the larger taverns in Obalon.”

“That explains how you got those potions,” said Lock as he continued to search the shadows of the cavern.

Clare stumbled but recovered her balance with a couple quick steps, “What makes you say that?”

Lock rolled his eyes, “I’m not a complete dope. Master brewers make the best potions, not alchemist. The real question is why your folks aren’t selling them locally. They’d make a killing.”

“It’s complicated,” stated Clare.

“Does it have something to do with those other two guys? Seemed like you knew them?” asked Lock as he continued his decent.

“No, they have nothing to do with it,” said Clare.

“But you do know them,” said Lock.

Clare glanced at Lock with her grumpy face, “Yes. They’re brothers, twins in fact. Magister Slater has taught them for over a decade,” said Clare.

“Seem more like lovers the way they ran off together at the start. How’d you know them?” said Lock.

“Slater’s my tutor too. Was anyway,” said Clare. She practically spat the words, clarifying what Lock suspected. She did indeed have a poor history with the Stanford twins.

Lock stopped walking and glanced back at Clare, "Should we be worried about them?"

Clare answered just a little too slow, "Worry about what's right in front of you."

Lock could not help but laugh, "You sound like my father."

"Your father sounds very wise," replied Clare.

"He certainly likes to think so," said Lock.

Clare laughed, "Parents, I'm pretty sure they're all like that."

Their laughter was cut short as Lock raised his hand to signal that he heard something. It was a faint clicking sound. He took a moment to search the shadows and found a group of five spiders that had scurried up the walls of the cavern and now prepared to ambush any unsuspecting prey. Lock jabbed two fingers toward his face, pointed at the patch of shadows hiding the spiders, then held up his hand with all five fingers extended.

She nodded and took aim with her spellrod. As she charged up a mana blast, Lock readied himself to defend. His preparation was unnecessary. Clare's charged blast was enormous, shattering both rock and spider. In an instant all five spiders were dead, and the tunnel was covered in broken bits of rock and dust.

"Fuck, how much mana did you hit them with?" asked Lock as he waved some of the lingering bits of dust away from his face.

Clare shrugged, "About twenty, twenty-five max."

"Remind me not to pick a fight with you," said Lock.

"Again," said Clare.

"Huh," said Lock.

"Not to pick a fight with me *again*," said Clare.

"Oh right, yeah. Thanks for not blasting a hole in my back then," said Lock.

Clare dipped into a slight bow, extending her hand for Lock to keep moving, "You're welcome but don't expect such kindness next time."

"There won't be a next time," said Lock as he moved through

most of the rubble then stopped in front of a chunk of rock too large to walk around.

“Ya know men always say that,” said Clare as she bumped into his back, “Right before they run off with some other girl, or head back to the nearest tavern.”

“I don’t drink much, and last time I checked you were not my girl,” said Lock as he jumped on top of the rubble and extended a hand to help her up.

Clare glanced at Lock’s hand but hesitated to take it, “And your temper. When was the last time you lost control of that?”

“The last time someone picked a fight,” replied Lock as he waited for Clare to take his hand.

It took her a moment before she accepted his hand and let him pull her up, “What’d they do, yell at your mother?”

“That would be pretty tough,” replied Lock as he hopped off the rubble, “She died fifteen years ago.”

“Holy Shit!” blurted Clare.

Lock spun around at the sudden outburst. People usually acted strange at that news, but shouting was a bit much especially given their situation. He glanced up at her to see if she was okay and found her staring at the roof of the cave, “You alright?”

“What?” said Clare as she snapped out of her daze and looked down at him, “Yeah sorry, I think I found our ticket to the bottom chamber.”

“What’s that?” asked Lock suddenly interested.

“It looks like a hidden chamber of some sort. I’ve heard rumors of Initiates finding them, but I always assumed it was just over embellishment,” said Clare as she moved closer to the wall and felt around.

“What’s in there?” asked Lock as he climbed back on top of the rubble. There was a faint purple light pouring through a hole maybe two and a half feet wide. With his vision enhanced by the auraband the purple light blended almost perfectly with the patches of shadow scattered throughout the caverns. But now

that he looked straight at it, there was definitely something up there.

“Don’t know. Give me a boost and we’ll find out,” answered Clare.

“You sure? There could be more monsters,” warned Lock.

Clare frowned, “I doubt it, they probably would have come out when I blasted it open. Either way, it’s worth the risk.”

“Alright,” said Lock as he bent down and knit his fingers together, “Still best if you keep your spellrod handy.”

Clare didn’t bother to answer as she stepped onto Lock’s hands. He lifted her with relative ease. She grabbed the lip of the hole then stepped on his shoulders and disappeared like a sneaky little cat. A good ten seconds later she poked her head out of the hole, “You’ve got to see this.”

“Back up, I should be able to jump and pull myself up,” said Lock. He took one step back then with a quick shuffle forward he leapt into the hole with his arms bunched in front of his chest. His shoulders scraped against the rocks, but he was able to cling to the lip of the hole. He half expected Clare to give him a little help, but she had already started exploring the hidden chamber.

He debated asking her to help then decided against it. Instead, he swung his dangling legs forward and muscled his chest over the lip. From there he was able to push himself the rest of the way. He rolled to his feet and gave a quick scan of the room.

The chamber was much larger than he expected. The walls were smooth and curved in the shape of a half dome. In the center of the ceiling there was a massive crystalline prism that emanated a gentle purple glow that lit the chamber. Around the prism there was a twelve-pointed star was etched into the ceiling. Each point of the star was a different color and each of those colors matched one of twelve short pillars that lined the outside of the chamber.

In the center of the room was a raised pedestal covered in concentric rings of sigils. That pedestal was what had attracted

Clare's attention. Her face was inches away from the pedestal's surface as she reverently ran her hand over the sigils.

Lock leaned over the pedestal to catch her attention, "What is all this?"

Clare smiled from ear to ear as she stood up, "It's a fusion chamber. Or infusion chamber, there's a fair bit of debate over what it actually does."

"What's fusion or infusion?" asked Lock.

"It depends on several factors, such as the mana type you choose, or which items get fused. The effects might even change depending on which Ancient built the chamber. But the general purpose is to imbue an object with a specific type of mana and give it enhanced capabilities. For instance, if it's infused with fire mana you can cast fire spells without performing a mana conversion. Even if you don't have a fire Blessing." said Clare.

"Sweet, how do we do it?" asked Lock.

Clare beamed, "Pay close attention," then she took her spellrod off her belt and stuck it into a six-inch wide pool of translucent liquid in the center of the pedestal. Once the spellrod was submerged she looped the strip of leather on its handle around a small nub on the pedestal, "There's pure Ether in the center. Make sure you don't touch it. Concentrated mana can be quite volatile."

Ether? Concentrated? Volatile? Lock wasn't sure if he was supposed to understand any of that, so he just leaned over to see how she secured the rod, "Gotcha."

Her spellrod was only a foot of perfectly straight steel and slipped all the way into the Ether. With loop of leather attached to the handle she would be able to pull it out without touching the pool of Ether.

"Then all you need to do is select the mana type," Clare waved her hand toward the pillars lining the chamber, "And feed it mana."

“How do you know which mana type each pillar designates?” asked Lock.

“Just look at the top of the pillar, each has a symbol for one of the twelve aspects. This one here is for light. Both of my parents and my brother earned light mana from their Blessing. I think I’ll choose that one just incase I don’t get a light Blessing. You should infuse your sword, so it will be easier to channel mana,” said Clare as she went over to the light pillar.

She placed her hand on the pillar and channeled her mana through her hand. As she fed it mana, pulses of yellow light ran up the pillar and collected inside the prism set in the ceiling. Each pulse made the light inside the prism intensify until it was a golden yellow as pure as the sun.

Clare pulled her hand back from the pillar and winced like she had a headache. A moment later a beam of blinding light shot from the prism to the pedestal and winked out. The chamber was left in total darkness but only for a few seconds as Clare’s spellrod began to fill the chamber with pure golden light.

Despite her obvious headache Clare walked up to the glowing pool of Ether with a smile on her face. As she unfastened the loop of leather and pulled the spellrod out of the pool of Ether; a golden orb of light flowed out of the pool, went through the spellrod, up Clare’s arm and settled in her chest. When the light from her spellrod faded, the prism in the ceiling filled the room with dim light. The only difference was that now the light was gold instead of purple. Clare wrapped her fingers around her spellrod, and she seemed to immediately lose her headache.

Lock glanced at her wrist to confirm what he suspected.

LVL. 3 Human Female: Clarisse Everbright

Exp. 81/1563

87/87 Health.

115/115 Mana.

SHE'D NOT ONLY REGAINED her mana but the infusion process gave her experience enough to reach level 3.

"Your turn," said Clare, "Just don't touch the Ether, it looks like it's still charged with light."

Lock drew his grandfather's sword and stepped up to the pedestal. The blade was only two feet long with another six inches of guard and handle. The only part that stuck out of the Ether pool was the inch and a half end cap at the tip of the handle. For a moment Lock had a sense of panic that he would never get the sword out without touching the Ether but there was just barely enough to grab.

Now that the blade was in place, he began to circle the room trying to think of which mana type would be best. His father never earned a Blessing so he didn't have a mana type and his mother was not around long enough for him to ask what mana type she had. He made a full circle before a thought came to him.

"Which aspect lit the chamber when we arrived?" asked Lock.

"I think you were seeing things, the chamber wasn't set to a mana type yet," said Clare.

"Then why was it purple?" asked Lock.

"I don't think it was purple, but purple corresponds to Void," said Clare as she pointed to one of the pillars.

Without another word Lock walked up to the Void pillar and put his hand on it. He expected to have trouble channeling his mana, but the pillar pulled it out of his body even worse than the spellrod. The strength of that pull was a little jarring, but he braced himself against the wall. A few seconds later he removed his hand and was greeted by a lance of pain to his temples. After watching Clare's go through the process, he knew what to expect. Still it took him a few deep breaths to make the headache to subside.

“Did it work?” asked Lock as he searched through the darkness.

“Not yet, you need to draw your mana through the sword to complete the fusion,” said Clare.

Lock felt his way back to the center of the chamber and carefully leaned over the pedestal. With his thumb and forefinger, he gently pinched the end of his grandfather’s sword and began lifting it out of the Ether pool. He only lifted it a few inches before the handle slipped out of his fingers and sank back into the Ether pool.

He rubbed his fingers, then gave it a second try and failed. Third time’s the charm. He tried pinching it with his left hand and failed again. After a third failed attempt it was looking pointless, but he couldn’t give up yet. For the fourth try he decided to use both hands. As soon as he started to lift the blade, he realized his fingers were too big for such delicate work.

The Ancients couldn’t have overlooked such a simple problem. There had to be an easier way to get it out without touching the Ether. Or maybe the Ether wasn’t as dangerous as Clare seemed to think.

She did know more than him, but by her own admission fusion chambers were extremely rare. If there was debate over what and how the fusion chambers worked, how did anyone know that Ether was dangerous.

“Fuck it,” blurted Lock right before he plunged his hand into the Ether pool. The moment his skin touched the Ether his vision exploded with color then all light just winked out.

CHAPTER 5



Lock lurched awake and blinked the stars from his eyes, “My sword?”

“Really? That’s your first question?” said Clare as she stood up, “Not, What happen? Or Is my hand okay? Or ya know Am I freaking alive?” Clare threw Lock’s sword into his chest, “There’s your sword and incase it’s not obvious I’m getting tired of saving you.”

Lock blinked a few times to clear his head a bit, “Um thanks, I think. What happened?” asked Lock, “All I remember is a bunch of lights.”

“You stuck your hand in a pool of pure Ether, and almost died,” said Clare.

Lock glanced down at his hands, “I feel fine, great actually. A little confused but great.”

“Good, then start walking. You’ve been out for almost half an hour,” asked Clare.

Half an hour! It felt like only a handful of seconds. If she was right, they had three more floors to survive. If they never slept, they had roughly nine hours, figure two hours per floor. And

another hour for each of the chamber bosses. That was cutting it real close.

Not to mention that the floors were likely to get more difficult the deeper they went. Regardless of how he felt, they had to move, "Not like I have a choice, we're running out of time."

"Yeah, come over here. I need help getting down," said Clare as she walked over to the section of floor she blasted open.

Lock sheathed his sword and followed Clare. At the hole he offered both of his hands, "Hold on tight."

"And what?" said Clare as if he was stupid.

"Just give me your hands," said Lock.

Clare rolled her eyes but placed her hands on his. As soon as they touched, he lifted her clean off the ground, "Whoa!",

Lock took a couple steps closer to the hole. Once she was over top of it, he started to lower her down. Then as she got low enough, he crouched down so he could lean into the hole and shimmied onto his chest to lower her even further, "You good?"

"Yes," said Clare, "You can let go."

Once she was down safe, Lock secured his sword and rolled over to lower himself down feet first. Thankfully, slipping through the hole was much easier on the way down. In a couple seconds they were back in the tunnels. It looked the same as he remembered, a handful of crushed spiders and a pile of stones and rubble.

"I'll take point," said Lock, eager to try out his infused sword on the next group of spiders, but it turned out Clare was also hoping to test out her spellrod and she was better equipped to strike at a distance.

The blast from her spellrod had a golden hue and it struck the spider center mass. The result was startling. Her blasts used to create a devastating explosion of raw mana. This time the blast shot right into the spider's body. A split second later it broke apart with a slight burst of light, "Oh yeah."

Lock twisted mid stride, "Impressive."

"Yeah, light mana is all about the flash," replied Clare with a smirk.

"What about void mana?" asked Lock with a twirl of his sword.

"Don't ask me, you picked it," answered Clare.

"Right, mind if I pick up the pace?" asked Lock.

After a nod from Clare, Lock started jogging down the tunnel. Despite his increased pace he continued to scan the walls and ceiling for more spiders. Partly out of caution but mostly because he wanted to test out his sword. It wasn't long before he found a pair of unsuspecting victims.

This time he was not going to let Clare strike first, so he used his secret weapon. His family's intrinsic ability, Flash Step. As soon as he triggered it, everything around him seemed to slow down. He closed the distance between him and the spiders in a fraction of a second.

First, he struck the one on the right with an upward slash then reversed his grip and stabbed down through the midsection of the one on the left. He pulled his sword free, glanced down at the bodies to make sure they were dead then checked the blade. It looked brand new, as if it had just been polished.

"That's strange," said Lock.

Clare slowed her pace as she caught up, "No, that was insane. What did you just do?"

"Not that, I mean my sword cut clean through them," said Lock.

"That's what swords do," replied Clare.

"I mean it was like they weren't even there. As if I was cutting through air and look the blade's not even dirty," said Lock.

Clare glanced at the dead spiders, "Maybe that's what void does to a sword."

"Maybe," said Lock as he started down the tunnel again.

Clare jogged after him, “Hey, hey, hold up. You better explain that whole becoming a blur thing?”

“It’s nothing. I just moved faster at an increased stamina cost,” replied Lock.

“Okay,” said Clare, “That’s cryptic.”

“Eh,” said Lock as he increased his pace to take point again. No time to screw around talking.

From there they slashed or blasted a clear path through the tunnels. To call their weapons effective, seemed like a bit of an understatement. They slaughtered their way through the rest of the tunnel so fast that it made the time they lost in the fusion chamber irrelevant.

Still, by the time they reached the third chamber they were exhausted. Or more accurately Clare was exhausted. Lock played along to make her feel better. In the meantime, he had extra time to study the boss room. It looked much the same as the last one but on the far side there were only two tunnels, both of which looked to be blocked by a sheet of white fiber.

“How much you want to bet it’s going to be a spider?” asked Lock.

Clare laughed but didn’t give him an answer.

“What’s so funny?” asked Lock.

“You don’t have anything to bet,” said Clare, “Besides I agree it’s going to be a spider.”

“A really big spider,” said Lock.

Clare frowned as if she were lost in thought, “With all these spiders, why aren’t there webs anywhere except here. I always thought spiders left cobwebs like all over the place.”

Lock snorted out a breath, “Finally something I know that you don’t. They’re cave spiders and cave spiders hunt by surprising or outrunning their prey rather than trapping them in a web. They’re hunters, not trappers. They use their venom then they’ll tie you up in webs.”

Clare played with her bottom lip for a few seconds, “Oh... well cobwebs are gross.”

“Agreed,” said Lock with a nod, “So, what’s the plan?”

“Same as before I suppose. You have to get close to use your sword plus you can use that blur thing,” said Clare as her eyes flicked to Lock then she immediately looked straight again.

Lock pretended like he didn’t notice then shrugged, “It’s called *Flash Step*.”

All of a sudden Clare bounced to her feet and pointed a finger at him, “I knew it was something special. Where’d you learn that?”

“Not sure it’s teachable. I picked it from my dad when I was little,” answered Lock.

“It’s an intrinsic skill?” asked Clare, “Like specific to your family?”

“I guess so, yeah,” said Lock.

“I’ve heard of them before,” said Clare, “but never heard of one like that.”

“Do you have one?” asked Lock.

“I don’t know maybe. My dad’s auraband says he has a skill called *Analyse*. He uses it to determine the base elements of a potion or solution. I never picked it up though.”

“Makes sense considering your family are brewers,” replied Lock.

Clare played with her bottom lip again, “Did you say your dad was a guardsman?”

“Yeah, what of it?” asked Lock.

“No offense but your intrinsic skill seems more suited to being a famous duelist,” said Clare, “I mean, you ran like thirty feet, killed two spiders and cleaned your sword in the time it took me to blink.”

“My dad quit dueling before I was born,” replied Lock. No need to tell her that his dad picked up matches whenever they needed the money. Hell, Lock wasn’t *supposed* to know either.

“Yeah, it’s probably pretty dangerous,” said Clare to break a silence that Lock didn’t realize they had fallen into.

Lock drew his sword and gave it a quick spin in his palm, “You ready?”

Clare twirled her spellrod, “Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER 6



“*M*ove!” shouted Lock as the giant spider shifted its attention toward Clare. She fired off another blast of light mana to knock it back then dropped to her knees clutching her head.

Without thinking he used Flash Step to sprint past the spider, caught Clare under her arm with his free hand. He immediately triggered Flash Step again and sprinted for the wall of the chamber. Clare was at her limit. That was the third time she had drained all of her mana and each time it took her longer to recover. Lock wasn’t much better off; he’d used Flash Step countless times and was covered in sweat. Judging by the soreness in his muscles he probably only had one or two more left before he collapsed from exhaustion.

“Hurry up and kill it,” stuttered Clare as she fought through her headache.

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do,” panted Lock as he spun around and squared off against the spider. It fixed its beady eyes on him and reared up on its back legs ready to strike. It used the same attack pattern every time he got close. It was predictable but that didn’t matter. Its hide was impenetrable.

His void charged sword did nothing. Every time he struck the spider it bounced off its hardened hide leaving hardly a scratch. It was then that his father's words came to him.

Don't keep chopping, try a different attack.

With that thought he charged the spider. The spider took on the challenge and lunged forward using its front two legs as spears. Both legs were perfectly aimed at his chest but at the last moment he used Flash Step and leapt straight into the spider's face. Venom dripped from its fangs as they closed in around his arm, but he was faster. He slammed the butt of his mana charged sword right between its eyes before its fangs could close.

The result of his one attack was equal parts disgusting and glorious. Streaks of purple mana tore through its body. Everywhere the streaks spread they disintegrated flesh and exoskeleton. The sight was gross, but the smell was far worse. It was like smoldering garbage mixed in with burnt stew.

Lock covered his nose as he pried the spider's fangs from his wrist, then he carefully worked his way away through the spider's putrid corpse, and went to check on Clare, "How you doing?"

"I'll live," said Clare as she propped herself up against the wall and took a swig of a dark blue potion.

"Spider's dead," said Lock as he flopped down next to her.

Clare reached into her bag and tossed him a pale green potion, "Couldn't have done that earlier?"

"Sorry I usually try to avoid punching giant things that are trying to kill me," replied Lock, "What's this?"

"Not much time to rest and your stamina needs a boost," said Clare.

Lock glanced down at his wrist to check his stamina.

LVL 4 HUMAN MALE: Matlock Sharp

Exp. 5/1963

78/158 Health.

45/62 Mana.

12/142 Stamina.

“THANKS, I didn’t realize I pushed myself that hard,” said Lock, “Leveled up though.”

Clare checked her wrist.

LVL. 4 Human Female: Clarisse Everbright

Exp. 120/1963

96/96 Health.

30/126 Mana.

39/53 Stamina.

“ME TOO, which is great, but we need to come up with a better strategy for next time. That was way too close. I can’t even figure why our weapons didn’t hurt that thing?” asked Clare.

“Not sure but it could have had a resistance to blades or certain types of mana,” said Lock, “It’s also the first monster that was a higher level than us.”

“Hmm,” said Clare “No resistance to that explody slam thing.”

“I wouldn’t count on it next time though,” said Lock, “We need a plan B.”

“We can’t change our weapons,” said Clare “But if it did have something to do with our comparative levels, we can work on it.”

“Huh,” said Lock as he tried to understand, “You saying, you want to level up?”

“Yeah dummy,” said Clare.

“Hey, be nice,” said Lock, “I just meant, we’ve been doing that the whole time.”

“I’m not saying we do anything drastically different. My brother said the highest level monster he encountered was level

5,” said Clare, “I figure if we clear all the tunnels and try to hit level 5 before taking on the next chamber guardian it will go a lot smoother.”

“It’ll take time, and we’ve only got three hours left. I’m not sure if it’s worth it,” said Lock.

Clare bounced her head around then took a sip of her potion, “It’s a risk but I don’t have a better idea.”

Lock pushed himself to his feet, “Me neither,” then offered his hand to Clare.

She grabbed his hand and let him pull her up, “You want to make a bet?”

“I thought I didn’t have anything to bet?” asked Lock.

THEY WASTED no time clearing out the tunnels. In their fight with the giant spider they’d almost forgotten how much of an advantage they had against the weaker monsters. Still clearing the tunnels quickly became tedious. Thankfully, Clare turned it into a bit of a competition and they started counting who had more kills.

“Fifty-seven!” shouted Clare.

“Sixty-one, sixty-two, and sixty-three!” shouted Lock from farther down the tunnel.

“Bullshit! You just hit fifty!” argued Clare as she rushed to catch up.

Lock stood there waiting, with his arms on his hips, “Count the bodies if you want but bats travel in large numbers.”

Clare kicked one of the dead bats, “I’ll pass. Bats are gross and I’ll bet the next chamber guardian is going to be a giant bat.”

“You know I don’t have anything to bet,” said Lock with a sly grin.

Clare shoved him to keep moving, “I know, it’s a figure of speech. You know, one those things adults say to make a point.

You should try it instead of grunting every time you swing that sword.”

“Don’t act like I’m the child here, I hear you making that ‘HoooAH’ sound whenever you charge your spellrod,” said Lock.

Clare waved off the comment and went straight back to business, “Whatever, looks like the fourth chamber is up ahead, we need to find another tunnel.”

Lock put his hand up to stop her, “Hold up, I’ve been marking them. This is the last one.”

“Damn, I still need a few hundred XP to hit level five. What about you?” asked Clare.

“About the same. The Stanford’s probably killed off the rest,” said Lock.

Clare looked like she was about to argue but nodded her head, “Agreed. We’ll just have to risk it.”

“Before we go do you have any more of those potions?” asked Lock.

Clare slipped one of her arms out of her pack and felt around inside, “Only one more stamina and two mana but I was hoping to save them for the last chamber.”

“Good idea it’s only going to get harder,” said Lock, “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“You first,” said Clare as she secured her pack.

Lock stalked into the fourth chamber, but he was barely five feet inside when he knew something was wrong. Maybe it was because the room was too quiet, or too still or maybe it was just too unthreatening to truly be unthreatening. Whatever it was, something screamed at him to escape and fast.

He used Flash Step to sprang backwards. As he flew backwards, he slashed his sword upward out of instinct. He didn’t know if he hit anything because of the void blade but he did feel that his sudden movement shoved Clare back toward the tunnel.

Instead of retreating to safety she collided with an inky black wall of shifting shadows and stumbled into his back. Clare

opened her mouth to complain then shut it and gulped down a mouthful of air.

Lock was about to check on Clare when he noticed an impossibly pale man in tattered robes standing in front of them. The man looked down at his chest then pressed his fingers to his abdomen. When he pulled his fingers away, they were coated in a putrid black liquid that was definitely not blood, "You're a quick one."

"You haven't seen anything yet," replied Lock.

The pale man flashed a pair of gleaming white canines as his lips peeled back into a smile, "Ah, the requisite boasting. It's been so long that I almost forgot about that part. Oh and last time I tasted my own blood," said the pale man then he paused to lick the blood from his finger tips, "You are going to provide some much needed entertainment."

"Only if you find a sword through the heart entertaining," replied Lock.

The pale man's face curled into a lopsided grin, "Threats can't mask the fear in your heart," then he flicked his bloody hand so fast that it was little more than a blur. In that instant his hand became perfectly clean. Worse, his chest healed. But his cloths remained as tattered as before. In fact, now that he had time to look at the man, the only part of him that lacked perfection were his tattered robes.

His face, his teeth, even his hair, all looked perfect. Too perfect.

"Lock," said Clare. Her voice quivered but despite that her spellrod began to cast a gentle glow from behind him.

"Don't worry about him, he's an Ashwisp," replied Lock with as much confidence as he could muster.

The man in tattered cloths chuckled, "Quite right, but you have something else to worry about," then he disappeared in a poof and reappeared on the other side of the room. He raised his pale hand and snapped his fingers,

“Meet my new friends. I didn’t have time to ask their names.”

A moment later two blobs of shadow drifted into the room from the cavern behind the Ashwisp.

As the Ashwisp spoke the shadows dripped off the two figures like a falling curtain.

“Jasper and Drew,” breathed Clare.

“Hey,” snapped Lock, “Time to focus. Those two are not the problem. We take out the Ashwisp and we stop them too.”

The light from Clare’s spellrod started to flicker and dim, “He’s too fast, he’ll kill us. We need to leave before we end up like those two.”

Not turning your back to a predator was one of the first lessons Lock. That said, you also never turned your back on a friend. He spun around and flicked Clare’s chin with his thumb, “It’s not speed. Its a trick that combines air and shadow mana. When he moves like that, he can’t hurt us but as you saw, we can hurt him. He has more to be scared of than us.”

“But... Jasper and Drew... he enslaved them,” stammered Clare still stricken with a perfectly rational fear.

“It’s his mental attack, and he’s doing it to us already. Inducing fear to take control,” Lock flicked Clare’s chin again, “Hey, look at me. You need to push it to the back of your mind. You hear me?”

Clare finally pulled her eyes away from Jasper and Drew and looked him in the face, “Yeah...” she said a little shaky then the light from her rod brightened, “Yeah. I mean yes. I’m focused. Let’s kill this Ashwisp.”

CHAPTER 7



*K*illing a wisp is a challenging feat, like trying to catch the wind. Killing one while two novice magi peppered you with mana bolts, was like chasing the wind in a thunderstorm and trying to avoid the rain. If it wasn't for their much-improved weapons and some slight practice at teamwork they would have lost in seconds.

The only real reason they survived was because Clare knew who she was fighting. Not only that she had far better aim and her blasts of light wasted less mana. If she wanted to, she could have taken them out with one charged blast. But they weren't the real enemy. Instead they fell into a battle of attrition.

The goal was to buy time so Lock could get close to the wisp and kill him. He'd already proven that he had the speed and power to damage the wisp. The only problem was that Lock had too much ground to cover. Flash Step didn't last long enough to get close and still kill the wisp.

"I can't hold them off forever," said Clare.

"No, but please do try," taunted the Ashwisp right before he disappeared across the chamber once again, "I'm rather enjoying this one chasing me."

“It’s no good, we need to try something else,” said Lock as he pulled up next to Clare.

“I’m open to ideas,” said Clare as she jumped to avoid a blast from Drew then fired a blast to distract Jasper.

“You remember how we found the fusion chamber? Think you can do that again?” asked Lock.

Clare glanced at her wrist, “Yeah but not with these two assholes attacking me.”

Lock didn’t waste time on words. Instead he rushed past Clare and attacked Drew. If his memory was right, Jasper had higher stats, which likely made him the stronger or older brother. Whatever.

Enslaved or not, the protective brother instinct should still be there and with one swift attack Lock put Drew on the defensive and triggered Jasper to attack him instead of Clare.

That was when Drew did the unexpected. He stopped retreating and swung his spellrod at Lock’s midsection. Lock’s dueling instincts kicked in and he bounced back. The move took him clear of Drew’s attack but a blast from Jasper caught Lock in the back.

As he lurched forward Drew followed up with a backhand strike from his charged spellrod. Lock narrowly avoided the attack by dropping into a sideways roll. Despite the awkwardness he was able to tuck his legs and pop out of the roll. As he popped out of the roll Lock used his momentum to hop to the side, and forced Jasper to stop attacking to avoid hitting his brother.

Lock was about to charge Drew when a massive section of the chamber wall exploded into a cloud of dust and shards of stone. The shockwave from the explosion knocked all three of them off their feet.

Lock blinked the dust from his eyes and tried to keep track of Drew. Before he the dust cleared the Ashwisp’s voice echoed around the chamber, “Forget him you idiots. The girl, get the girl.”

Something in those words reminded Lock of the nonsense lectures his father always gave after sparing.

Fights aren't pretty. They're fast and ugly. Winning is even uglier and you can't do it by sitting on your ass.

There were seconds before the Ashwisp's command would take hold of Jasper and Drew, he had to act. Lock swatted the dust out of his face and lunged at the last place he saw Drew. Luckily his shoulder caught him in the stomach.

It caught Lock off guard how easy it was to move him and Lock put way to much muscle behind his lunge. He went down face first. Regardless he shoved Drew at his brother hard. It was still too dusty to see perfectly but he heard both brothers go down. More important he caught a glint of light as one of their spellrods dropped on the ground.

Lock pushed himself up and did a sloppy version of a belly crawl toward the brothers. When the thought he was close he flung out his hand to snag the spellrod. And found nothing but stale dirt. He was less than an inch away.

"An inch short and a second late," said the Ashwisp as he plucked the spellrod off the ground and pointed it at Lock.

On instinct Lock curled into a ball. It did nothing to protect him from the barrage of mana blasts the Ashwisp fired into his back. The force of the blasts was nothing compared to what Clare could manage. Still the rapid fire attack cut through his simple leather armor and flattened him to the ground.

In seconds it tore a hole in his armor and started to burn away tiny patches of his skin. Lock clawed at the ground but the barrage of mana bolts never stopped coming. More and more of his skin was burnt away and his vision was blinded by pain. The pain intensified and threatened to leave him unconscious. With a grunt of effort, he pushed the pain out of his mind and tried to roll away. His rolled turned into a couple inch belly flop. Then something slammed against the side of his body and sent him tumbling across the cavern floor.

The pain in his back started to subside but then his vision exploded with golden light and he blacked out.

“COME-ON, COME-ON, PLEASE BE ALRIGHT,” said Clare as she cradled Lock’s head in her lap. Her spellrod dangled from her wrist and bumped into his shoulder. That gentle touch sent a lance of pain down his back and forced him awake. Thankfully when he opened his eyes the blinding light was gone.

“Did we win?” asked Lock.

“Quiet,” said Clare as she pressed a tiny vial to his lips, “Drink this and stay still. We’re running out of time.”

Lock pushed the pain to the back of his mind and swallowed the potion. It burned like drinking pepper juice and damn near left him in tears. He did all he could not to move or react but that potion was intense.

It also worked and slowly the pain in his body began to subside.

He laid there still and waited until his breathing evened out, “What happen?”

Clare’s top lip curled up at the edges and she bit off the words as she spoke, “There’s some good and some bad. The Ashwisp’s dead and Jasper and Drew are themselves again.”

“That’s the good part, right?” asked Lock.

“Sort of. We need to go after Jasper and Drew. Can you stand?” asked Clare.

Lock flexed his hands then twisted his midsection, “Well the pain’s gone, but I must have dropped my sword again.”

“Yeah, that’s the bad news. I’ll explain on the way,” said Clare as she offered her hand.

Lock accepted her hand but Clare was too tiny to offer any real help. He pulled on her arm but had to stand up with his own power for the most part, “What happened?”

Clare immediately took off at a steady jog, “They went down

the second tunnel from the right. If we hurry we should be able to catch up.”

Lock kept pace a few steps behind her and a twinge of pain shot up his back. The pain was annoying but it was nothing compared to the intensity from a few seconds ago.

“Start talking,” said Lock between breaths.

Clare’s eyes flicked to Lock then back to the tunnel in front of them, “I’m not sure if you were still conscious but after you tackled the Stanfords, I blew up the Ashwisp.”

“I figured as much after it exploded in my face,” said Lock.

“What was I supposed to do, it would have killed you?” snapped Clare.

Lock patted the air with his hands, “Take it easy, I’m not blaming you.”

Clare turned her head away from Lock and sped up a little. Lock increased his pace to keep up, “I was only trying to hit the Ashwisp but it was on top of you and I didn’t want it to escape.”

“So you added some extra mana to make sure you got him. Good call,” said Lock.

“Maybe, or maybe it was overkill. The Stanfords thought so,” said Clare.

“Clare what happen to my sword,” said Lock.

“Well...” said Clare, “I may have blown up more than the Ashwisp.”

Lock’s eyes bulged, “My grandpa’s sword.”

“Not quite. I blew up Drew’s spellrod,” said Clare.

“Then what happen to my sword?” asked Lock but as soon as he said it the answer came to him, “Wait, that cocksucker took it didn’t he.”

“I tried to stop them, but I emptied my mana into that last attack, and you didn’t look like you were going to make it,” said Clare.

Lock waved his hand at Clare, “Don’t worry about it, I know how to handle a couple of crooks.”

Clare caught Lock's forearm and slowed her pace, "Hold on."

Lock rolled his wrist and broke Clare's hold on his forearm, "For what? They took my sword. I'll get it back."

"I'm not arguing that, just be careful. That healing potion might get you up and moving but it won't put you at one-hundred percent," said Clare.

"I've been dealing with punks like them all my life, I can handle this," said Lock as he started jogging again.

"Okay, okay, I'm just saying, be ready. They both hit level 5 when the Ashwisp died," warned Clare.

"So did I," said Lock as he raised his hand into a fist.

LVL 5 HUMAN MALE: Matlock Sharp

Exp. 120/2441

62/211 Health.

76/76 Mana.

115/183 Stamina.

"THAT'S GREAT, but don't underestimate them. They've both been trained by Magister Slater and if the rumors are true, he's never lost a duel," said Clare.

"Then he's never faced my dad," replied Lock offhand.

"Those two might be pricks but they each have twice as much mana as you and trust me they know how to use it," said Clare.

Lock just laughed.

"I'm serious," said Clare.

"I know you are, and that's what's funny," said Lock.

Clare sped up and jumped in front of Lock, "Look I know you're tough, but they aren't monsters. If you attack them, they won't be fighting like half-baked zombies."

"What is your point? That I should let them go?" asked Lock.

"I'm saying you are injured, unarmed, outnumbered and they

are very well trained,” said Clare, “Maybe it would be best to avoid a fight and get to the last challenge.”

Finally Lock stopped brushing Clare aside and looked her straight on. The concern on her face was enough to give him pause and reconsider his next move.

“I hear ya, and all that makes perfect sense. But sometimes the right thing to do doesn’t make sense at all. Sometimes you have to fight when the odds are stacked against you. Besides, I’m not outnumbered right?” asked Lock.

Clare pressed her eyes closed for a moment then bobbed her head, “I’m with you.”

The conviction in Clare’s voice brought an unexpected smile to Lock’s face, because despite their differences and previous arguments, they had become something more than opportunistic allies. They were friends.

“I know,” said Lock as he took off a steady jog.

Clare followed a few paces back in what had become their ‘go to’ combat formation. In less than a minute they caught up to the Stanford brothers. The brothers must have heard or been expecting them as both stood side by side facing back up the tunnel with their weapons at the ready.

“You two have gone far enough. Either you pop those crystals and save yourselves any further embarrassment. Or we’ll make you,” said Jasper.

Before Lock could even react, Clare snapped, “Embarrassment?! You’re the one that was trapped by the Ashwisp, you delusional prick.”

Lock’s eyes flicked to Clare then back to Jasper then settled on Drew, “Give back my sword and things don’t need to get ugly.”

Drew leveled the sword at Lock, “Give back my spellrod you,” but Jasper stopped him by raising his free hand.

“A reasonable request. The weapon no doubt has considerable value to you. My brother’s spellrod had value to him,” Jasper

paused to scratch his chin, "He shall return it to you once we have cleared the final chamber. You have my word."

"Only a fool accepts the word of a thief," replied Lock.

Jasper waved his hand at Drew keeping him silent, "No need to start throwing insults but I take that as a refusal which leaves us at a bit of an impasse."

"That sword is leaving in my hand, one way or another," said Lock as he shifted his gaze to Drew, "Your choice."

Drew's face screwed up as if he suddenly smelled a pile of garbage, "You should be honored I even considered using your filthy blade."

Lock triggered Flash Step and was in Drew's face before he finished speaking. To his credit Drew's instincts were quite fast. He at least tried to attack. With the speed of Flash Step it didn't matter. Lock caught his hand and elbowed him in the chest. It wasn't enough to do any major harm, but it loosened his grip on the sword. Lock yanked the blade out of his hand and pointed it at Drew.

With his attention focused on Drew, Lock missed what happen between Jasper and Clare, but now Clare had her golden glowing spellrod pointed at Jasper. Jasper on the other hand stood behind some sort of mana barrier and stared at Clare. The hatred that passed between them was almost palpable.

Whatever had put them at odds, it had had time to dig deep. Hatred like that had nothing to do with Lock's sword or being ungrateful.

Drew bumbled back to hide behind his brother. Lock walked over to stand at Clare's side, "It's done!" he said then lowed his voice, "We still have a big fight ahead of us."

It was a surprise when Jasper was the first to drop his shield, "This isn't over."

"But brother," began Drew but Jasper silenced him.

"If you couldn't hold onto your weapons, then you don't

deserve them. Best learn that by the time father hears what happen,” said Jasper.

After chastising his brother, Jasper turned his back and walked away. Drew gave Lock a hateful stare then rushed after his brother.

“Where to from here?” asked Lock.

“I know we’re short on time but there’s no way I’m going after those two,” said Clare.

“Can’t argue with that. Besides I need a little more time to recover. Your potion is wearing off and my back is killing me,” replied Lock.

CHAPTER 8



The other path down to the last chamber was an easy trek. Aside from a scant bat or two, it was uninhabited. The never-ending twists, turns and dead ends from the upper floors were gone. Even the ground changed.

Instead of the sloped uneven dirt floor from the caves above, there was perfectly level cut stone tiles. As they reached the bottom even the walls smoothed out. It was like the tunnel itself was trying to invite them into the last chamber. It was almost too good to be true.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Clare as the tunnel began to open up to the final chamber.

"Not much we can do about it, we've got less than an hour," said Lock in agreement then he moved forward in silence to the end of the tunnel.

"See anything?" asked Clare as she pulled up beside him.

"The chamber is massive. In the center it looks like a ring of pillars toward the center of the room and whatever's in the middle of the pillars is glowing," answered Lock.

"That must be the Well of Radiance. All we have to do is reach

it, and the Initiation is over,” said Clare, “But I’ve heard stories about all sorts of weird stuff happening here.”

In an effort to gage the distance Lock tried to count the number of tiles between them and the pillars. He lost count around fifty and hadn’t counted more than a tenth of the distance. Each tile was about a yard long, which meant they had at least five hundred yards to cross with no cover. Worse there was no light. If there was something hiding in those shadows, they’d be easy prey.

“There’s a lot open space between us and the well,” said Lock.

“I don’t see any other options,” said Clare as she placed her hand on Lock’s shoulder and pointed across his body, “Looks like the Stanford’s came to the same conclusion.”

Lock cocked his head toward Clare with a sideways grin, “Want to watch them get mauled by whatever monster is lurking out there?”

Clare smiled but then she flicked Lock in the gut, “I want my Blessing more.”

“Back to back then,” said Lock.

Clare bobbed her head, “Let me give us a little light first,” then she gripped her spellrod. The runes on its surface lit up and illuminated a good twenty foot ring around them.

“Glad we found that chamber,” said Lock as he crept out of the tunnel. Even with the light from Clare’s spellrod he kept his head on a swivel. Every few seconds he would glance toward the pillars to make sure they were moving in the right direction then back to check on Clare. She was doing much the same thing except that she was also checking on the Stanford brothers as well.

They were punks. Nothing to worry about. At least not at the moment. They were too focused on earning their Blessing to waste time, “Forget about them.”

“Sorry,” said Clare, “Habit.”

“Its fine,” said Lock as he continued to cross the chamber, “Stay focused. There’s something hiding out here. I can feel it.”

Clare gulped down a breath and continued to backpedal at a slow steady pace, “Maybe a little more light,” then the tip of her spellrod flared even brighter.

It was so bright Lock had to raise his free hand to keep from being blinded, “Not too much.”

When they were around the midpoint Lock realized that he was covered in sweat, his heart hammered faster than it had the entire time in the tunnels. Something about the openness and limited sight brought up a deep instinctual fear. It was the same fear that drove Clare to intensify the light.

“Sorry,” said Clare then she dimmed the light from her spellrod.

When her light returned to normal Lock, glanced back to check on her. A few loose strands of hair were stuck to her face, her breath uneven but she was focused. She was ready.

Then something occurred to him; This challenge wasn’t about defeating a monster at all. It was all about fear.

But not to push through a passing moment of fear. They had done that many times in the previous challenges. This time was different. The fear was constant; it could not be pushed aside by the urgency of battle. This fear could only be overcome by accepting its presence.

Lock took a deep breath and let his muscles relax.

Whatever happens I’m ready for it.

A crack of thunder shook the room almost like it was responding to his thoughts. The sudden noise caused Clare to jump, letting out a little yelp.

Lock caught her with his free hand, “It’s alright, no matter what that was. We’ve got it.”

Clare clung to his arm and slowly her breathing evened out, “Thanks, you’re right,” then she let go of his arm and brushed the loose hair out of her face.

A wave of hot air washed over them and was followed by a series of crackling pops emanating from the Well of Radiance. When they checked the source of the sound it was like a bonfire had exploded inside the ring of pillars. Patches of flame littered the area around the pillars.

Clare breathed out a slow breath, "What do you think the odds are that we have to fight a dragon?"

Lock froze mid-step, "The chamber is Dragon sized," but then his rational mind considered that possibility, "But no. The chamber would smell like ash and sulfur."

"That's reassuring," said Clare.

"If it helps, I'm pretty sure whatever we have to fight is waiting for us at the well," said Lock.

Right after Lock spoke something exploded in the same direction that they last saw Jasper and Drew. Both Clare and Lock turned their attention toward the sounds. They turned just in time to see Drew get yanked into the darkness. Jasper threw up one of his mana barriers but it did nothing to stop his brother's screams from echoing throughout the chamber.

To his credit Jasper dropped his barrier and rushed after his brother. He was too slow. He didn't make it more than a few feet before his brother's screams cut off. The chamber dropped into an eerie silence.

"Perhaps we should hurry," said Clare.

"Agreed," replied Lock.

With renewed caution the two of them made their way to the ring of pillars. Out of the corner of his eye Lock kept track of Jasper. Not that it was difficult as he maintained his mana barrier the entire time. It would have been a lie if he said he watched him out of concern. But the main reason he watched Jasper was because he would be the first to encounter whatever waited for them at the Well of Radiance.

As Jasper passed through the ring of pillars it sounded like he was speaking to someone. They were still too far away to make

out any words, but Jasper didn't sound scared. He sounded more confused than anything.

A few moments later a male voice answered. They were still too far away to understand the words, but the intent was clear. The man had dismissed Jasper like an annoying child.

Jasper responded in an even voice, but his usual cocky undertone was hard to miss. This time a woman answered in a soothing almost melodic voice.

When Jasper answered they were finally close enough to hear what he said, "This is ridiculous. I made it here on time."

Clare's caught Lock's eye and together they jogged the last twenty yards. As he thought there was a man and a woman standing next to the Well of Radiance. Jasper stood just inside the ring of pillars with his spellrod charged and ready.

The man stood like stone with his arms crossed in front of him. He wore a cream-colored cotton shirt over a pair of simple grey trousers. He was unarmed and looked like one of the thousands of nameless faces Lock passed everyday. There was only one feature that made the man stand out. His eyes. They emanated a gentle light-blue glow as if somehow his eyeballs had been charged with mana.

One look in those eyes and there was no denying that this man was dangerous. Dangerous in a way that scared the living hell out of Lock.

The woman to his right was the stark opposite. Her arms rested calmly at her side. At the sight of them her face turned into a welcoming smile. She was dressed in an elegant day dress of blazing crimson. Around her neck hung a large heart shaped ruby that flickered with deep red light. Unlike her companion the woman was armed with a short thin spellrod, that looked almost like a sewing needle.

The woman shifted her weight and her needle like spellrod burst into a blade of pure flame, "Clarisse Everbright, you've

done well,” said the woman as she raised the flaming spellrod above her head, “Now show me what you’ve learned.”

The woman slashed the air in front of her and created an arc of flames. The wave of flames flew straight at Clare. Without thinking, Lock jumped in front of her and sliced through the flames with his Void powered sword. The arc of flames broke apart and littered the ground all around them with tiny bits of flame.

Instantly the woman’s smile shifted, to a mask of rage. She bounced a few inches into the air and a pair of flaming wings burst from her back. She fixed her eyes on Lock and began to drift toward him.

“Insolent child,” said the woman as she raised her flaming spellrod.

As the woman began to swing her sword, the stone faced man appeared in front of her with his hand clamped around her wrist. Just like that, one moment he was standing next to the well, the next he was standing in front of them. He’d traveled twenty feet in an instant.

Lock had seen his father pull off similar feats countless times but there was one major difference. And that difference was terrifying. There was not a single sign of movement. No scuff on stone floor or ruffle of clothing. Even the man’s hair remained perfectly still.

“Do you wish to pick a fight with the Temporal Guard?” asked the man.

“He is the one who interferes, not I,” replied the woman.

“He did and has proven himself worth my time. So, I ask again, Cassandra. Are you looking to cross the Temporal Guard?” asked the man.

The woman cast her eyes to the side, the flaming wings winked out and she drifted back to the ground, “No, ensure he does not interrupt me again.”

The man released the woman’s wrist and dipped his head in

acceptance. Then just like that he was gone. A heartbeat later he appeared again. This time his hand was clamped around the back of Clare's neck.

He shoved Clare at Cassandra, "Remove yourself from my presence."

The woman bowed her head, "As you wish," then she flashed a playful smile at the man, "Little Leon."

Without another word Cassandra swirled her spellrod above her head and created a spinning mass of flames. The flames wrapped around her and Clare like a blanket then dissipated into a puff of hot air. Clare and Cassandra were both gone.

"Theatrics," said Leon as turned to face Lock.

Lock still had no idea what was going on. He didn't have a clue who this guy was or how he got here. He just prayed that he didn't have to fight him.

Everything they faced up to this point was difficult, but victory always seemed achievable. After their brief display of power there was no way Clare stood a chance against Cassandra. The same for Lock against Leon. These two were in a league of their own.

"The fuck is going on?" asked Lock but then he remembered what Cassandra said, *show me what you learned*. The point of it was not to win the fight; it was to show what you could do.

"MatLock Sharp," said Leon as he turned to face him and folded his arms in front of his chest, "You have piqued the interest of the Temporal Warden. I am here to assess your potential. Are you ready?"

Lock took a steadying breath and settled into a low guard but before he said anything Jasper had a little outburst, "You would test this lowborn fool and not me?!"

Leon stood motionless like a cat waiting to pounce then without warning his left forearm snapped up. The air around Leon rippled then there was a thunderous crack and Jasper tumbled into the darkness as if he'd been kicked in the chest by a

horse. The only sign of what had happen was a cloud blue sparks that lingered in the air. The same blue as Leon's eyes.

"Lower your weapon. This is not a test of martial ability," said Leon.

A sudden wave of relief ran through Lock as he lowered his sword and stood up straighter. As much as he excelled at fighting, he was injured and even a sparring match would painful. Especially against a guy like Leon.

"Then what am I supposed to do?" asked Lock.

"Show me how well you know yourself," answered Leon as he held up three fingers. After a moment Leon curled two fingers under his thumb leaving only his index finger, "First question. What was your first lesson?"

Lock's mind raced. *Lesson what lesson.* He had countless lessons with his father, but what was the first one. *Footwork, running, balance.* He'd been working on those things for longer than he could remember but what did they translate into?

Leon folded his arms and looked to be running out of patience, so Lock blurted the first thing that came to mind, "Evasion."

Leon's eyes narrowed, "Explain."

On instinct Lock started to repeat his father's words, "Most fights are about avoiding your opponent and waiting for an opening. It's a mistake to think you can win by attacking head on all the time."

"And how did the slime teach this to you?" asked Leon.

The question took Lock by surprise for a second time. *Slime.* He had not encountered a slime until his Initiation. That was what he meant; the first floor. What did it teach him?

"I realized I did not have an effective weapon when I attacked one of the smaller slimes. I did not want to make the same mistake again," answered Lock with confidence this time.

"Good. *Know your limits.* You have many, as do we all. To be a Temporal you must understand this and strive to overcome you

limits. Always. Improve. That is our first tennet,” said Leon with a nod and what could have been a slight smile, “Understand?”

“Yes, training changes but it never ends,” said Lock echoing his father’s words once again.

“Indeed. The second lesson?” asked Leon.

Now that he understood the context of Leon’s first question, the second made a lot more sense. Lock turned his thoughts to the fight with the giant spider. How did he win? He smashed it between the eyes with the butt of his sword. Why? Because nothing else worked. His void sword hardly scratched the spider’s hide and Clare’s mana blasts did next to nothing. But why? Because they were out of options, he had to win in that moment, or they would have been goners.

“To never give up,” answered Lock.

Leon unfolded his arms and took a half step back, “No. Even an animal continues to fight when their life depends on it. If that is all you learned, you are not fit to be a Temporal.”

No? How could it not be the lesson? Persistence is what got them through that fight. Hold on, he called himself a Temporal Guard. A guard’s duty is to protect others and in that fight, he protected Clare by killing the Spider.

“Wait, I learned that sometimes the only way to protect your friends, is to kill your enemy,” said Lock.

Leon shook his head, “No,” then folded his arms in front of his chest again, “But you did act decisive out of a desire to protect the girl. The ability to think clearly and act decisive is a rare trait even for a guardian. To be a Temporal it is essential. And for that I will reinforce your second lesson this one time.”

Without warning Leon attacked. Not with superhuman speed or any of his Temporal abilities. He attacked with the speed and finesse of a professional fighter. First with a straight jab followed by a low sweeping kick.

Lock’s instincts kicked in and he swatted down Leon’s jab and stepped over his kick.

Leon's next series of blows came even faster, a quick punching combination followed by a front kick. The punches were meant to distract from the real attack, the kick. It was a simple tactic that Lock had seen hundreds of times, but Leon's kick was lightning fast. It would have shattered Lock's hip, but with Flash Step he was able to bounce away.

"Quick," said Leon, "I see why the Warden took notice of you."

Lock twirled his sword and let his muscles relax before their next exchange, "I thought this wasn't a test of martial ability."

"This isn't a test," said Leon right before he disappeared. When he reappeared his fist struck Lock in the face like a hammer, "It's a reminder."

The punch was strong, but Lock's body was relaxed enough that he was able to roll with it and keep his balance. As he spun away from the punch, he lashed out with his sword to counter attack.

Leon was already gone, "If this was a real fight, do you think a sword would make any difference?"

"Only a fool enters a battle without a weapon," said Lock.

"The Temporal Guard does not need weapons," said Leon, "They are weapons," then again Leon disappeared. The next thing Lock knew his hand went numb and his sword clanged off one of the nearby pillars.

In a panic Lock triggered Flash Step, jumped backwards and spun around hoping to catch Leon off guard with his speed. As he spun Leon reappeared less than a foot in front of him. Enhanced speed or not he walked right into Leon's hands. He dropped to his knees and jabbed Lock in the gut. Lock lurched forward from the wind being knocked out of him, "You think speed changes anything?"

As Lock struggled to recover his breath Leon released an onslaught of jabs and punches. The attacks bounced Lock around like he was trapped in the middle of a stampeding crowd. His head spun until finally he felt a solid blow all along the side of his

body. He blinked away the dizziness and realized that final blow wasn't a blow at all. It was him hitting the ground.

Leon nudged Lock onto his back with the tip of his boot and stepped on his chest, "Weapon's gone. Speed failed. So now what?"

Never give up.

That was the lesson for him. Not some cryptic bullshit that Leon thought he should have divined from the fight.

Never give up.

The words were hammered into his head since the day that he was born. That simple phrase had gotten him through many fights, including the one with the giant spider. Who the hell was Leon to tell him otherwise?

Lock stared up at Leon and shoved his foot off of his chest, "I just realized something."

Leon kept his balance but only by planting his foot right under Lock's armpit, "Let's hear it, but you better be sure. No more second chances."

Lock couldn't stop his mouth from curling into a smile right before he clamped his arm around Leon's ankle. Before he could react, Lock used his other hand to grab Leon's calf and formed a figure four-ankle lock.

Like most people who have their leg trapped, Leon's initial reaction was to try to pull his leg free. It was the perfect way to give Lock all the leverage he would need to dislocate his foot.

"Yeah, you're faster and you've got me outclassed, but..." said Lock as he tightened his hold, "I'm bigger," then he tightened it more, "I'm stronger," then Lock arched his back to break Leon's ankle, "and I Never Give Up!"

Right before Leon's ankle snapped, he let out a vicious scream in Lock's face then the entire world spun. It was as if he had suddenly been tossed into the middle of a hurricane. The sensation only lasted for a moment, but it was enough for Leon to break free.

Leon stumbled a few steps and dropped onto his knees, "You're a stubborn one."

Lock's stomach twisted and he felt himself start to gag, but before he threw up all over himself Leon shoved him onto his side.

"Don't try to fight it. You'll feel better in a few minutes," said Leon as he patted Lock's back in a surprisingly gentle gesture, "I meant it when I said that was the wrong answer but what you showed me just now was not simple determination. It was *Adaptation*. When one attack failed, you tried another. Not blindly but also not with conscious consideration."

For a few moments Leon sat in silence while Lock puked his brains out. He didn't fight it, he just let his stomach empty itself and tried his best not to get any of it on his cloths. By the time it was done, he did feel better. Weak but better.

Lock sat up and scooted a few feet away from his pile of puke, "Does that mean that I failed or that I passed?"

Leon tested his ankle, then pushed himself up and offered Lock a hand, "Neither, there's still one more question," before Lock could answer Leon raised his hand, "In that fight you showed the ability to adapt. When one attack did not work, you tried another. In the end that's what made you succeed. *Adaptation*. But you did it more on instinct than by intention."

Lock took Leon's hand but stood up with his own strength, "Point taken. Always, improve as you said. You ready to hear the last one?"

Leon smirked, "Go for it."

"Sometimes victory is ugly," said Lock without hesitation.

Leon's smirk widened as he snorted out a laugh, "I was going for *Sacrifice*, but the sentiment is the same."

"Does that mean I passed?" asked Lock.

"It means that I have judged you worthy of carrying a Temporal Blessing. But it is still your choice," answered Leon as he walked over to the Well of Radiance.

Lock let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding and felt a wave of relief settle over him. All of the injuries from the day were not for nothing. They weighed on him more than he had wanted to admit. Now that the challenge was over, A wave of exhaustion washed over him. Exhaustion so bad that he almost collapsed right there.

By sheer will he pushed his body over to the well, "Now what?"

"Drink and the Well will take care of the rest," answered Leon.

CHAPTER 9



Whatever happen after drinking from the Well of Radiance, Lock had no idea. Either his memories were lost, or he passed out. Regardless a lot of time must have passed. The first thing he noticed was the pre-dawn sunlight. The next thing was that he was on a bed. The bed was way too comfortable to be the bundle of blankets he normally slept on. That meant he must be in one of the spare bedrooms of Lord Stanwick's Mansion.

Leon was right, receiving his Blessing was easy but he failed to mention that he was going to lose so much time. That or he did actually pass out. Leon also failed to tell him what sort of abilities he would get. Regardless, that was a problem he could figure out at another time. For now, he had something else to attend to, his aching stomach. Comfortable bed or not he had to find some food.

He threw aside the blankets, and immediately realized he was butt ass naked. Once the shock of that wore off, he also noticed that he was clean, and his wounds had healed at an alarming rate. That or he'd been asleep for days, not hours.

A quick scan of the room and he found a fresh stack of cloths.

A pair of maroon trousers with a cream button down shirt, the colors of house Stanwick. He would have preferred not to wear the colors of any house, but he couldn't walk around naked. Besides, there was a higher priority. Food.

Luckily all he had to do was follow his nose... and one of the Lord Stanwick's maids.

"Excuse me, what was your?" asked Lock.

"Rebecca milord," replied Stanwick's maid with a quick curtsy.

"Thanks Rebecca, but I'm no lord. Just a lucky fool," said Lock.

Rebecca started to speak then stopped, "Sorry, my mistake. I meant no disrespect..."

"No worries. I can't imagine Magister Tempo owes many favors to fools like me," said Lock, "Mind showing me to the kitchens?"

"There's a spread laid out in the dining area. This way," said Rebecca then she let out a nervous bit of laughter.

Lock thanked her again and let her lead him to the dining hall. Instead of making her more uncomfortable Lock decided to keep his mouth shut and followed her through the halls. Before he knew it, Rebecca held open a pair of double doors, "Here we are."

"Thanks," said Lock as he dipped inside. Clare was already there along with a handful of what looked like other initiates. All of them were dressed in Lord Stanwick's colors.

"Finally woke up I see," said Clare as she walked over with a plate full of some sort of little sandwiches.

"How long was I asleep?" asked Lock.

"I was just teasing you, most of us couldn't sleep after getting our Blessing," said Clare.

"Most of who?" asked Lock.

"The other initiates. The ones that passed at least. Wait, you didn't get your head bashed in by that mean guy, did you?" asked Clare.

“No. Well kind of but I’m fine. Just hungry,” said Lock.

Clare twisted and hid her plate behind her body, “Don’t even think about it.”

Lock flashed a smile then used Flash Step to snatch a pair of sandwiches off of Clare’s plate and downed them two quick gulps, “Hank ou.”

Clare shoved him and pulled her plate away again, “The table’s full of food. Get your own.”

As if responding to her jest, Lock’s stomach rumbled, “Yeah good idea.”

After hearing that, Clare lead him past the food table. She even offered to carry an extra plate of food for him. Once he had a pair of plates loaded up with some food, Clare led them to a couple seats. They sat and exchange stories about their last encounter.

As it turned out Clare had a similar but far less violent question session with Cassandra. In the end she earned what was called a Searing Blessing. It gave her some ability to summon fire or use fire. He didn’t know enough about Blessings to understand fully.

“I thought you wanted a Light Blessing,” asked Lock, “Like the rest of your family?”

“Eh,” said Clare, “Fire’s close enough. Besides, my dad will be ecstatic. He’s always hiring fire magi to sanitize the fermenters.”

“Fire does sound pretty cool to me,” said Lock, “Better than Temporal anyway. I don’t even know what it means.”

“Better than Temporal?!” blurted one of the initiates that was apparently listening in on their conversation, “You must be joking, Temporals can use Spirit mana and that is far superior to any other type.”

“Sod off Ruffus,” said another initiate who seemed to think he was also part of the conversation, “Not all Spirit Blessings are as powerful as the Santi’s.”

Well, that was a good bit of information. It was well known

that the Santi family did not earn their position simply by birth right or political maneuvering. They did it because they were strong, or they possessed a strong and unique Blessing. Spirit mana might have something to do with it. That was good news to him.

The two guys argument was cut short when the double doors to the dining area slammed open. Then a sudden snap brought silence to the room and pulled Lock from his thoughts. When he looked up Magister Tempo was standing by the entrance to the room with the other two Magisters.

“That’s much better,” said Tempo into the silence, “Congratulations Initiates. Our gracious host, Lord Dmitri Stanwick, has a few words for all of you.”

The two Magisters held open the doors and in walked Lord Stanwick. He was wearing an elaborate cloak and an almost identical set of clothing to what most of the Initiates now wore. Fitting, considering they were his house’s colors.

Stanwick flicked his cloak off of his shoulders; “Today you have all earned great honor for yourselves and your families. You have my congratulations.”

Stanwick paused to look around at the faces of the Initiates, “Earning a Blessing from one of the twelve great deities is no small feat. But it is only the first step in a long journey. The next is to be properly trained and for that I offer my support.”

Stanwick motioned to one of the Magisters, “For those of you who pledge to be one of my retainers there are aurabands,” and the Magister held up a handful of aurabands much like the one they were given before the Initiation.

Next he motioned to Magister Tempo, “And enrollment forms for WayStar Academy. Tuition and housing will be taken care of as well as a monthly stipend of fifty talents.”

“Regardless of what you choose, you are welcome to eat your fill and stay as long as you like. My doors are open to you, and

good luck,” said Stanwick then he spun on his heel, swished his cloak out like a fan and left the room.

As the doors slammed shut, Magister Tempo stepped up to address the room, “Lord Stanwick’s offer is a generous one, but I encourage all of you to take time to consider all of your options. One weeks from today Lord Santi will be holding his tri-annual games. The games are an opportunity for the Blessed of all skill levels to showcase their abilities and in turn attract a patron. I am sure some of you do not require any support, but the games are also a great way to gauge your own skill level.”

Tempo took a step back and to the side giving the stage to one of the other Magisters, “For those of you I have not met, I am Magister Cadence. I am sure you are all eager to go test out your new abilities so I will keep this short. Lord Santi’s games feature three challenges for the recently Blessed.”

Magister Cadence paused to hold up a finger, “One will focus on applying brute magical strength.”

He added a second finger, “Two will focus on finesse.”

Last he flipped his hand over to add a third finger, “Third is a test of speed.”

Cadence dropped his hand and folded it neatly behind his back, “Keep this in mind as you explore your new abilities. Prepare as best you can and good luck.”

With those final words the room broke into dozens of little bits of chatter. Lock’s brain was exploding with information. He had to find a patron, get training, and prepare for tests of some sort. On top of all that he had some sort of paperwork to fill out. Maybe Magister Tempo or Clare would be willing to help him with it.

“Planning to take Stanwick’s offer?” asked Clare.

“Huh, ah no. But I was going to get some of that paperwork. What about you?” said Lock.

“Heck no, my parents would kill me if I became a retainer. It might be a good option for you though,” said Clare.

If she had been so blunt twenty-four hours ago Lock would have been offended but now, he was getting used to her straightforward nature. Besides she was right, he was poor as dirt and she was not. Regardless, he was not about to make a decision without talking to his dad first.

“I’d like to see what happens at the games first,” said Lock.

“Good idea, if you do well with even one of those challenges, I’ll bet Stanwick will make a better offer,” said Clare.

Better! Stanwick already offered fifty talents a month, that was over five times what his dad made in a month and she’s saying you could get more just from doing well on a few simple tests.

“Well no shit,” said Lock. It was time to get back to training.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I know not everyone feels comfortable reviewing books, but I enjoy hearing from readers. I love even more to hear from fans. A simple comment or rating would be much appreciated.

If you didn't enjoy the story, I also encourage you to give your feedback because a high five might feel good, but criticism is what helps me to improve. And that is priceless.

*Thanks for Reading,
-Brian Declan-*

Once again, thanks for checking out my latest series The Whetstone Fist. If you enjoy please check out some more of my work starting with my free debut novel: Hidden in the Reed's. Or see what else I'm up to on my website: www.briankdeclan.com. You can also find the rest of the Whetstone Fist series: here or check out a sample of the next episode below.

*Thanks for reading,
-Brian Declan-*

A LOOK AHEAD



EPISODE 2 - CHAPTER 1

Lock laid on his back and stared up at the mid-day sun. Then a knot of rage and frustration formed in the pit of his stomach. He slammed his fist into the ground, “Dammit!”

His father Flint leaned down and offered him a hand up, “I say we try my idea.”

“I told you I’m dizzy enough afterwards. How am I supposed to keep my balance if I can’t see,” said Lock as he took his father’s hand.

“Don’t be such a baby,” said Flint as he dangled a small strip of cloth in front of Lock’s face like he was taunting a dog with a piece of meat.

Lock ignored his father’s wide grin and snatched the strip of cloth, “Fine but only so you shut up about the stupid blindfold.”

Flint clapped his son on the back, “That’s my boy. And since you’re already pissed off,” Flint paused for dramatic effect then poked Lock in the chest, “You’re welcome in advance.”

As he tied the blindfold over his eyes Lock took a few slow breaths so the knot in his stomach would relax. When he stopped feeling like he was going to puke he reached for the power

swirling throughout his body. That was his mana. It had always been a challenge to manipulate but since he earned a Blessing from one of the twelve great deities controlling it was as easy as walking.

Triggering his ability, Temporal Slide, was like taking a deep breath. Mana surged from the pit of his stomach, swirled all around his body, then in an instant he teleported. From the outside that fraction of a second it might seem easy but for Lock that fraction of a second was torture. Every fiber of his body was flipped around and turned inside out like he was caught in a raging hurricane then suddenly he was dumped back on solid ground.

It had taken a full week of practice to simply not throw up every time.

He let out a slow breath to release the last bit of tension in his stomach then focused on his target, a flat patch of ground ten yards in front of him. Without his eyes to guide him he created an image in his mind then triggered Temporal Slide. The ground shifted under his feet, but he was quick to catch his balance.

Several seconds passed before he realized what happen. He slid and didn't feel like the world was spinning. As soon as he realized what happen so did his father, "Hoo Hoo, Who's the best? I said, Who's the best?"

Lock pulled off the blindfold only to find his father doing a little jig with an even wider smirk than earlier.

"Come on son. Help me out here. Hoo Hoo, Who's the best?" continued Flint.

"You're the best," answered Lock with a complete lack of emotion.

Flint stopped dancing but kept his smile, "You're no fun. So, what's next?"

"I have to Slide farther, and I have to be able to do it without the blindfold," said Lock.

"Oh come on dummy, that's easy just close your eyes. And who

cares how far you can go, you're not running away are you?" asked Flint.

"That's... actually a good idea. But no I'm not running away. I have to hit a target that's... I don't know how far away. But I do know it's more than ten yards," said Lock.

With blinding speed and grace Flint scooped up a pebble and flicked it at Lock. The pebble hit him square in the chest, "So throw something."

"That's not what it's about. It tests my spell amplification or something," said Lock.

"So you have to punch the target?" asked Flint.

Lock stared at his father expressionless, "No dad. I have to hit it with magic, but I can't figure out how to throw magic."

"So that's why you have to punch it?" asked Flint.

Lock nodded his head in agreement, "Yeah pretty much."

"I still don't understand why you don't use Flash Step, always helps me punch what needs punching," said Flint.

Lock huffed out a breath, "How many times do I need to explain. I have to use mana and according to Clare, Flash Step doesn't use mana. Stamina based abilities won't be tracked."

"Oh yeah Clare. Tell me more about her," said Flint with a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

Lock threw his hands up, "Really dad?! You're supposed to be helping me train with this Temporal Slide."

All sense of levity drained out of Flint's face, "Think you can use that trick of yours to keep up for once?"

Lock cracked his neck and settled into a low guard, "Think you can you fight fair?"

"Fighting isn't fair," replied Flint right before he took off with his version of Flash Step and kicked up a cloud of dust in his wake.

. . .

ANOTHER DAY, another loss, but his true failure did not come at the hands of his dad. That honor was all his own. He'd always known that his greatest weakness was his understand of mana. Or lack of understanding and now that weakness was manifesting itself in an inability to use his Blessing.

His best chance to overcome that weakness was to get a proper education but that cost money. Lots of money. Money that he did not have. His best chance to get money was to prove he was worth investing in. But to do that he had to show he was able to use his Blessing.

It was a fucked up loop. Do well and you get money, but to do well you needed money. Money. Money! Fucking money!

"Cheer up sourpuss, you didn't lose that bad," said Flint from the bottom bunk of their one room shack on the outskirts of East Stanwick. Their little neighborhood was called Greenside, not that there was a lick of green in sight. Mud, dirt, and grime, all of those were plentiful. But *Grimeside* made it sound too much like the shithole it was.

"I know, and I'm not a sourpuss. I'm tired," replied Lock as he stopped staring at the ceiling and rolled onto his side.

"Still, you did pretty good. Used that Slide thing what ten times in a row, while in Flash Step I might add," said Flint.

"Five, and then I threw up. Thanks for the reminder," said Lock.

"Just saying, that's more than I've seen. Jumpers usually burn out after two or three," said Flint.

Lock sat up and accidentally bashed his head into the ceiling, "Ah dammit."

"You alright up there?" asked Flint.

"Fine," said Lock as he rubbed his head, "What do you mean more than you've seen before? And what's a Jumper?"

Flint paused just a little too long before answering, "Nothing, just something I heard while on patrol. Forget about it."

Lock rolled on his side and punched his pillow to fluff it up, “Yeah, patrolling Bruno’s arena.”

Before the word’s left Lock’s lips, his head bounced into the ceiling again, “Watch yourself boy. That was a long time ago.”

A long month maybe.

What could Lock say? Every time they docked the guard’s wages, dueling was the way his dad could put food on the table.

Silence was Lock’s only answer. He knew his father well enough to know the conversation was already over. Flint Sharp didn’t answer questions from anyone, least of all his son. And he would never admit that, long ago was probably not long at all.

GLOSSARY

Adept – A mage with a Blessing that has successfully completed at least one year of formal education.

Archon – A mage that has never earned a Blessing.

Aspects – Light, Fire, Stasis, Life, Earth, Illusion, Void, Spirit, Water, Shadow, Air, or Mental.

Auraband – A tool in the shape of a tight bracelet that is specifically designed to monitor an individual's stats. It can also be used in combination with a spellrod to perform advanced targeting techniques.

Blessing – A Blessing is the reward for successful completion of an initiation. They can come in any of twelve different Aspects.

Over the generations Blessings of each Aspect have been grouped into four different tiers. Although there is great debate over the establishment of these tiers it is generally accepted. Tier one is the weakest and most common, Tier four is the rarest yet most potent.

To some extent Blessings are influenced by hereditarily though not in all cases.

In addition to the twelve aspects, Blessings also have up to three distinct subclasses.

Delve Team – A team of at most five magi that has come together with the specific purpose of venturing into a dungeon.

Dungeons – Dungeons are the most concentrated havens for wild monsters.

Ether – In short Ether is mana in liquid form, but it is far more most concentrated than the typical gaseous form of mana.

Exel – A mage with a Blessing that has successfully completed at least three year of formal education.

Guardsman – The lowest level of city defenders, they rely on martial skill instead of magical gifts. Despite their low status they are responsible for keeping pacified areas free of wild monsters and typically fight on the front lines.

Initiate – Any individual who has completed an initiation, earned a Blessing and has not yet completed any formal education.

Initiation – A formal test that takes place in rare, heavily guarded dungeons. Due to their rarity most countries conceal the location of initiation dungeons and restrict access to only the most well prepared. The actual test consists of clearing five floors; the first is a starting area, the next three are the main challenges and the last is an area reflection.

Leyline – Constantly shifting currents of mana that flow deep beneath the surface of the earth.

Mage/Magi – Any individual who has developed their ability to control their own mana. Often this is focused on enhancing their combat abilities or creating more potent magical items. Potions, spellrods, enchanted crystals, etc.

Magister – A title given to a Blessed mage that has completed five years of formal education and possess master level proficiency in at least one form of magical expression.

Magnus – A mage who has completed five years of formal education, achieved expert level proficiency in dueling, coopera-

tive battle magic, defensive spellwork and can perform at least one area effect spell or skill.

Mana – The purest form of magic. It can come in any of thirteen different forms; one for each of the twelve Aspects as well as plain mana.

Mana Crystal – The most concentrated form of mana. Creation of synthetic mana crystals is an extensive, labor intensive process. The easiest way to obtain them is by defeating wild monsters before they have established themselves in a single location like a dungeon.

Potions – Potions come in many forms but are in short are created by fermenting ether so it can be consumed without adverse effects. The fermentation process can be altered to produce potions with a wide range of beneficial effects.

Praxar – A mage with a Blessing that has successfully completed at least four year of formal education.

Relar – A mage with a Blessing that has successfully completed at least two year of formal education.

Spellrod – The most common tool used by magi. It is a multi-use tool that enhances a mage's ability to cast spells, fire mana bolts and create barriers.

Waygate – Stable portals that allow for instantaneous travel between two locations.

Wells of Radiance – A series of wells with a single purpose, to grant a Blessing. How they grant Blessings is one of the great mysteries that magi have researched for centuries.

